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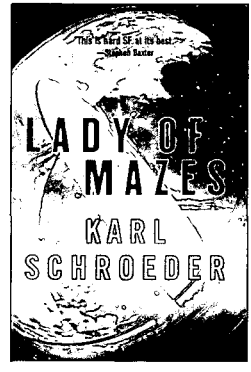

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prologue to the endeavor: LUCK BE A LADY TONIGHT

PROPOSED BY HARLAN ELLISON®

IN MORE than fifty years of a writing career that has produced well beyond 1700 stories and articles and reviews and blahblahblah, there have only been 2 — count 'em — 2 ideas I haven't been able to transmogrify into full narrative.

Two.

A pair of story-ideas I knew were terrific, but which have obstinately repulsed my every attempt, over decades, to pry loose the tender flesh in those lobster claws.

What every professional knows (whether s/he has ever written and sold a story or not), is the core secret that *makes* every pro or wannabe a capable storyteller of professional *ability*: an idea is not a story.

We all get a hundred "good ideas" a day. And occasionally we say, "Boy, that would make a great story." And even less often we actually write the story. Once in a great while it *is* a great story. More often, it is, at best, of professional quality, never less. The definition of "professional."

It is a helluva jump, however, from Alfred Bester thinking, "In a society where everyone is telepathic, how do you commit a murder and get away with it?" which is a great *idea*, and writing *The Demolished Man*, which is a great *story*.

You can ruminate about how interesting it would be to investigate the clash between a self-made hustler from a vulgarian background, and entitled but "casual" cliques with money, but it's a helluva jump from that nubbin to *Washington Square*, *The Great Gatsby*, or *An American Tragedy*, all of which proceed logically, professionally, from that same nubbin.

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So when I say I have gnawed the nubbins to greater and lesser creations of story, you may be assured I am spreading my ink-stained paws in frustration and self-effacement when I admit to being totally, absolutely, everlastingly stumped by two errant eidolons.

Apart from resenting myself for allowing a good one to lie fallow, thus depriving me of a payday (another mark of the professional), I am utterly *dying* to find out what happens in those two ideas. And so...

I called Mr. Van Gelder, head gargoyle at this cathedral, and I said, "Why don't I sorta kinda devise a challenge, a write-off, a...well...an *endeavor*. I would lay out the basic story idea, the nubbin, in a few lines, as much and as far as I've gotten in all those years; and then *you* offer the challenge to maybe half a dozen of your best, sharpest, most arrogant writers, new or old, and let them write their *own* story around that nubbin.

"Let them go where they want, create characters as they want, restrict them in no way as long as the basic idea is the core of the story. What I've done will be kept to an absolute minimum — "

When you start to write a story, you have one hundred percent of your choices available. The instant you write "the" instead of "what" or "she" instead of "he," your choices are reduced by fifty percent. And each word thereafter narrows your venue proportionately. Until you've predestined where your story *must* go.

" — because I want them to create absolutely as much as they'll need to tell their own tales. If I start with a characterization of the principals, that reduces their options by fifty percent. If I pick the setting, there goes another slice of choice pastrami. Pick the year and the wedge is even thinner. So I'll give the teeniest minim for a good bunch of professionals to dote on.

"I have insisted that Mr. Van Gelder choose wisely. The writers must have sold a few stories, no amateurs thank you very much. They must be at least as good as I (virtually impossible, but what the hell, no harm in asking). And they must be given full and total freedom to do with the nubbin what they will.

I herewith and for all eternity, in all mediums now existing or on their way to fruition, convey permission for these writers selected by Mr. Van Gelder to use the material herewith profferred. I absolve

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this magazine of any claims on my part to ownership of the material. This prologue is copyrighted and registered, and my name is Trademarked and Registered, so bear that in mind, but *beyond* that, the way is clear.

Now. Here is the idea that's been tumbling in my mental bingo cage for at least forty years:

Lady Luck is wending her way through a gambling venue. Could be a Vegas or Atlantic City casino, a Mississippi riverboat, a 1930s betting parlor, a horsetrack, a cockfight in Havana, a slot machine gallery in a private men's club in London, a paramutual parlor, or any other locale.

I see her in my mind's eye view as looking a lot like Milton Caniff's Dragon Lady. But she can be any age, size, appearance, upholstered female one chooses. I see her svelte and slinky: Rita Hayworth singing "Put the Blame on Mame," Lena Horne on Catfish Row, Veronica from the *Archie* comics, Marta Toren in "Paris Express." Others may see her as nine years old with a teddy bear, eighty years old with a walker, obese in a homestead sackdress pulling a slot handle, or just average looking, a pleasant-seeming Everywoman.

She is wending, touching one guy, then another, letting the men win a hand or a roll or a spin. Nothing much. She's doing her job.

But then, a guy comes in, sees her, and is "struck by the hammer," à la *The Godfather*. He is smitten beyond measure. Smit-TEN. Smited, smote, smoot, knocked on his ass with True Love. He follows her around. He can see her.

The only problem is, he won't leave her alone. He dogs her, sycophantic and smooten. She cannot get rid of the guy.

And the other, uh, small complication is:

This guy is the biggest loser who ever walked the Earth.

That's it. That's all of it. And even what I've given you here is malleable, plastic, up for grabs.

I think the essentials: Lady Luck, schnook, True Love, are what form the basic nubbin; but beyond that, I'm told change is a healthy thing.

Mr. Van Gelder, the ball is in your court.

I'm *dying* to read my stories, to see how it all comes out.

— Harlan Ellison

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So with the ball in Van Gelder's court, your editor began to riffle through the mental Rolodex, looking for suitable candidates to take on Mr. Ellison's project. Otis Adelbert Kline never answered his email, but lady luck smiled on us and three of our top picks were able to schedule time to contribute a story. First up is Tananarive Due, an American Book Award recipient whose six novels include The Good House, The Living Blood, My Soul to Keep, *and most recently,* Joplin's Ghost. *Her last appearance in our pages was "Patient Zero" in the August 2000 issue and we're pleased to welcome her back. Many of our early readers said this story was their favorite of the three takes on Lady Luck.*

Señora Suerte

By Tananarive Due

I HATE THIS PLACE.

Someone got the idea — brilliant or inane, depending on how the meds are tickling my brain that day — to dress up this place with games. Someone thought the general air of Death might smell better with a whiff of Fortune. General collection of losers that we are, it would be nice if someone could win something once in a while. That's the idea.

Brilliant or inane, it truly does not matter. You'd have to live here to see the boldness of the notion. You'd have to be breathing in the urine-soaked air. Picture Fidel's worst prisons with festive shooting galleries — not with real bullets, mind you, but pellets knocking over rows of smiling duckies — and maybe you would get the picture.

Have I mentioned yet that I don't like it here?

I hate this place.

A few years ago, I could have sat you down over a few rounds of *mojitos* and sifted through other facts that could have been called pertinent, at least at the time: Born in La Habana province outside of

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Mariel, Cuba. Second of five children. Bank manager in Hialeah, Florida, for thirty years. Married twice, once happily. Widower twice, once unhappily.

Brace yourself: Only child, a son, died in a car crash at seventeen. That was once the defining fact of my existence. A whisper of my son's death, and I got hisses, moans, blinking eyes, tears. I got laid, even. It was a powerful fact. That's Gilberto. His son died. His *only* son. His namesake. (Gilberto. Not Gil. Not Bert, for God's sake. Gilberto.) Gilberto lost two wives and a son, they clucked. What an unlucky man. *Come to me, pobrecito.*

But before I came here, I was a virgin. I thought bad luck was a myth, and had vastly underestimated the phrase's meaning in either Spanish *(mala suerte)* or the English I worked so hard to learn as a young man in my twenties, when I had to begin my life anew. *Mala suerte.* Now, I live in bad luck's bosom. It suckles me to sleep — that, and the meds. Thank goodness for sleep. My only goal in life is more sleep. I'm so far behind. Raul, in the bed next to mine, sleeps all day, the lucky *bastardo.* All day, and no one bothers him.

No sleeping for me. When I first arrived, I got trotted around like a poster boy for recovery. *Look at Gilberto, Mrs. Sanchez. He had a stroke only three months ago, and he can stand on his own two feet. Look at Gilberto, Mr. Ortiz. He's already feeding himself with both hands. Look at Gilberto, Mr. Benton. Look at Gilberto.*

The day of the stroke, I had a beautiful dream. No pain, just visions. One minute I'm munching on *pastelitos* at my favorite Cuban bakery on Flagler, and the next minute I'm at the emergency room. In my dream, I see my first wife, Maritza. The woman had a beautiful face, but I called her El Diablo. She was a horror. When I saw her again, I thought I must be on my way to Hell. So I asked her: "Why were you so unkind?" And she shrugged her shoulders in her awkward, unrefined manner. "I didn't know how to be another way," she said softly. Of course, no? It made sense at the time, so I forgave her. Deep in my heart, I forgave her. I told her I was sorry for the way I danced when her headache turned out to be a brain aneurysm, my problems gone like that. And she smiled. Such a weight was lifted from me!

Then, her face became Camilla's. *Mi reina. Mi vida.* Not as beautiful

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as Maritza — in her younger years, judged by her face, Camilla had been lonely — but I saw her clean, pure spirit. All kindness. And I understood: As in life, I had to pass my first test, Maritza, to see Camilla again. Perhaps it was Heaven calling for me. She touched my face, and an indescribable feeling bathed me. Better than sex, better than rum, better than music. A feeling we don't find in this world.

The next thing I knew, no Camilla. I was in a hospital room. I could not speak, I could not move the right side of my body. After an eternity, in answer to my prayers for a cessation of misery, I was brought here. So, either God has a grudge against me or has no better way to amuse himself. Either way, we don't speak anymore.

Was it not enough I was an exile? Exiled first from my homeland, and next from my loved ones? Did I ever complain? When others would have cursed God, I never did. But for this place, God has some answering to do. There is no excuse.

I hate this place.

Here, we are not exiles, engineers, postal workers, grocers, bankers, grandparents, or deserted lovers. No — here, we are beds. Sixty beds. This is a place where people come to die when there is no one to take them in, like unwanted mongrels. Most of us are helpless to carry out even the most basic dignities of life, worse than babies. And someone of authority — the new administrator, or someone trying to impress him — looked out at this collection of sad human debris and said, "Ah! Let the games begin."

So now, there is Bingo. B-I-N-G-O, like the *gringo* children's song.

I can hear you laughing, so you must get the joke. Bingo in Hell's parlor.

"You have a very bad attitude, Gilberto," a young nurse, Antoinette, chides me. No one has taught her not to call her elders by their Christian names, but I tolerate this because she understands the words from my ruined mouth. My translator.

"*¿Que?* Did I say anything?"

"You don't have to say it. I see it in your face. They like the Bingo. Why come watch others play every day just to make fun? You should play, too."

But she is wrong. I don't come to watch the others play. Only a sadist would be entertained watching scarecrows listing in their wheelchairs,

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raising trembling fingers when they win, hardly realizing when they are wetting themselves. Does this sound like a sane person's amusement? Yet, it is true. I come every Friday. I wheel myself to the lounge by two P.M. without fail. I am the first one inside, the last one to leave.

But I never win. Remember? *Mala suerte.* Playing to win would be a waste of my time.

I come for Her. My angel.

Unlike me, she doesn't come every week. Angels cannot be summoned like pizza delivery, and I accept this. But the entire room changes when she walks inside. The light shifts to a bright golden hue, the exact color of twilight. The walls, which are usually growling at us with the promise of suffering, begin to sing.

The first day I saw her, I admit it, I believed it was only the meds at work. At first glance, she seemed to be a typical nurse, invisible in a powder-blue uniform that would make any woman seem boyish, white shoes squeaking across the floor, and a name-tag that read *ROSARIA.* Her skin was browned with the echoes of an *abuela negra* whose African genes kinked her hair into tight brown ringlets she wore like a crown atop her head.

Then I noticed her eyes.

Dios mio, such eyes! Beneath her luxuriant lashes, her eyes are black coffee beans, shining like the night itself. I saw her eyes from across the room, and they stole my concentration from the droning call of the Bingo numbers, my hand frozen above my cards. Her eyes held none of the dull dispassion or thinly masked contempt of the other nurses who occasionally gazed upon our pathetic game. Her eyes darted and dashed the way my little Gilberto chased our housecat to and fro when he was small, soaking up every detail about us. Instead of seeing only our tubes and wheelchairs, she lingered on our faces, memorizing our existence, blessing us with personhood.

You can believe me or not, but I swear to what happened next on my dear Camilla's soul: As soon as I noticed her eyes, I gained new eyes myself. Her image changed. I was no longer staring at a nurse in a uniform, but a visage who glided across the floor in a sheen of pale light. *Floating,* you see. Her hair was suddenly an impossibly long mane behind her, following her on the floor like a wedding train spun of dark lamb's wool.

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She met my eyes and smiled at me. I have seen dying men resuscitated with electric shock, and that sensation can be no more jarring than her eyes. Her gaze shocked me back to life.

No one else at the Bingo game seemed to notice her. Not Pedro, who breathed through oxygen tubes and coughed blood into his handkerchief, making such a racket that it was hard to hear the numbers — not Dixon Washington (or Washington Dixon, I forget which), who always sat with his hand shielding his Bingo cards as if his neighbors could somehow cheat if they saw what Fate had dealt him — not Mrs. Martinez, who dressed up for Bingo games in her fading white lace dress and spring hat as if Bingo days were Easter Sunday — not Stella Rothman, a World War II widow who always cupped her ear to try to hear the numbers, complaining that her hearing aid was made in Japan and therefore wasn't worth a damn — and not Crazy Joe, who called *Bingo!* every other number even though he was the only one with worse luck than mine.

No one else glanced in the direction of this magnificent creature. Only me. To them, she was a nurse named Rosaria making an obligatory tour to see to it that no one dropped dead at a table. Such a death, after all, might ruin the game.

But she is much more than a nurse. I know that now. Perhaps she is Oyá herself. I have reasons for speaking so. I alone see her. I alone know what she does.

Our game is the perfect place for her to visit undetected. Bingo, you see, is not a game of skill, nor of will. There are no true choices — only luck. Each player is issued six cards, so in our game, anyone can expect to win at least once, even in a fellowship as cursed as ours. During the three hours we play, there are three or four winners. Sometimes more. Not me, of course — winning is not in my makeup — but *usually*. From time to time, even Crazy Joe is right when he claims he has his Bingo numbers lined up. A broken clock tells the time twice a day, after all.

So, I do not blame the others for not seeing it as I do. They would have to see *her*.

The first day Rosaria arrived in the Bingo room — the first time her eyes gave me access to the truer vision of her — I watched her glide from table to table, pausing like a honeybee collecting nectar. She lingered over one wheelchair for a time, then moved to the next. And the next. With

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each person she passed, she seemed to be *listening* for something only her ears could discern. I watched her so closely that I lost my concentration, forgetting the administrator's bored drone as he called the Bingo numbers.

How I longed for her!

Not as a woman, mind you. I will confess she is beautiful — with a face that is fine-featured and yet ever-changing, with cheeks as hollow as an Indian princess in one moment and then as full as my Camilla's in the next — but it was not her beauty that commanded my eyes. I have not known hunger in my loins since Camilla left this Earth, and my body no longer craves a woman's touch. But as I watched her, even the first time, all of my heart cried out: *Choose* me.

Bless me. Save me. Choose me.

But she did not.

Several minutes passed before she made her decision. My eyes had never left her, so I saw the exact moment: She took her hand and rested it across Pedro's shoulder, her lithe fingers weightless. He was so intent on smothering his constant cough in his handkerchief that he never noticed the rare gesture of kindness. But I did. All at once, Pedro's cough went silent.

The visage was gone. And the nurse Rosaria, unnoticed, slipped away to her duties.

But the change that came over Pedro! Without his cough to bedevil him, Pedro sat straighter in his chair, with a young man's posture. He marked his cards with fervor, his ears virtually twitching every time a number was called. His pencil flew. I heard him laugh to himself, a sound of boyish joy. On that day, as I witnessed the transformation, I believed the Bingo games were a brilliant stroke, and felt my faith in our caretakers renewed. I shared Pedro's sudden belief that he *could* win, and that winning a simple game could matter to creatures such as we.

As I had anticipated, it was only moments before Pedro's voice rose, silencing the room: "*Bingo!*" he called through phlegm. Like a conqueror. He waved his card above his head.

The prizes in our Bingo game are nothing to speak of. What is money to us? The staff gives the winners little tokens — brightly wrapped sugarless candies, postcards of beaches and mountain ranges, photo frames in which to display the evidences of younger days on our nightstands — but

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winning the game meant everything to Pedro that day. His skin flushed pink. His eyes danced. I never heard him cough again the entire game. When he won the second time, he nearly leaped from his wheelchair.

Pedro was not the only winner that day. But he was the only one *chosen*.

That very night, you see, Pedro died in his sleep. His monitors made no sound to alert the nurses, and later it was discovered that his oxygen machine had been unplugged. His roommate, Ben Wallenbech, said he slept so soundly that he never heard his neighbor's machine stop.

There was no outraged family to answer to, so the "investigation" amounted mostly to shrugged shoulders and shaking heads. Many speculated that Pedro himself had unplugged his oxygen. Those who had seen him at Bingo recalled his last moment of triumph, saying he chose death on that night because he wanted to leave this world on a winning streak.

After that, I kept a special eye for the nurse, Rosaria. She frequently visited the Bingo games, but I never saw the amazing metamorphosis I saw the day she chose Pedro. I came to believe I had hallucinated, or perhaps that I'd simply had a flash of premonition like my Tía Maria, the way I knew in my bones that my little Gilberto would not come home from football practice the night he died.

A week after Pedro's death, I suffered another stroke, one so minor that I did not notice it while it happened. But one morning I realized I could no longer stand and walk even the few steps I had mastered a short time before, the model of recovery. To this day, whenever I try to stand, my legs tremble as if I have no bones.

I can still mark the Bingo cards. But most days for a time after that, I only watched. Even the sight of Rosaria could not cheer me, because she never again appeared as she had that day, and I stopped believing in magic. I lost my spirit of play.

Until a month passed. And everything changed.

The Bingo game was flourishing. A male nurse named Jackson volunteered to be the new caller, and he was so animated that he might have been a preacher at a Baptist church. Jackson made all the difference. The sound of laughter regularly filled our tiny Bingo hall now, ringing through the hallways to the ears of those who were not well enough to participate. But I could not share their laughter.

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"Gilberto, your face is gonna be in a permanent frown if you don't practice smiling again," Antoinette told me as she wheeled me into the hall, as she always does. "Don't worry, *papi*. Your legs will grow stronger." Such a sweet, young face to already be such a liar! The truth is plain to me now. I believed their lies, even when I fought not to. No one here grows stronger. No one here gets better.

And on that day, when I felt most mired in my helplessness, I saw her again.

This time, I did not even see her as plain-dressed Rosaria, the nurse who came and went without notice. I saw a shadow emerge in the doorway, impossibly long for the lighting from the hall, and at its tip was a large, winding spiral shape I could hardly make sense of.

She followed her shadow into the doorway. This time, she wore her dark hair in thick, ropy shapes splaying from all sides of her head. The largest was an oversized, upright whorl the size of a python that looked as if it weighed several pounds. Her face was obscured behind the light that floated around her like a swampland mist, but how could I mistake her?

This time, I knew. My veins raced with adrenaline.

"We got lu-cky number *O-72*, ya'll. That's the year the Dolphins went undefeated, so you *know* that's lucky. You got O-72, you're a winner." Jackson called on, unaware.

She floated serenely down the rows of tables, toward mine. Something blocked my ears suddenly; perhaps my heart itself, silencing everything except its own excited thrashing. If my legs had obeyed me, I would have stood up and fallen to my knees in her path. When she passed only a foot from me, I nearly pissed myself. I smelled Camilla's favorite perfume in her wake, and tears came to my eyes. I opened my mouth to speak, but I had forgotten all language.

"What's that? N-32?" Stella Rothman said, cupping her ear.

"O-72," someone yelled. "Jesus, will you get that thing fixed?"

Stella tugged at her hearing aid. "It's my fault it's made in Japan? Not worth a damn."

The entity did not dally this time, as she had the first time I saw her. She went straight to Stella. She glided behind her, and laid her hand gently on Stella's shoulder, her fingers like twigs.

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"*Seventy*-two?" Stella said. "Wait a second. Just a second." As she stared at her cards, light brightened her face, erasing her furrowed brow. She had told me once that her life ended the day the telegram from the War Department came; I couldn't remember the last time I had seen her smile. "*Seventy*-two? I can't believe...I got it! Bingo!"

Need I tell you? It was only Rosaria who stood behind Stella then, stripped of her magnificent visage. Amidst the groans of disappointment from players who had not been as lucky as Stella, no one saw Rosaria lower her face, hiding her inscrutable eyes. I was the only one who watched the nurse leave, back to her mundane duties.

I was in a state that night, as you can guess. I had less appetite than even this food deserves. I could not sleep. Had I more control of my limbs, I might have taken myself to Stella's room to watch her doorway. To see the outcome for myself.

But in the end, of course, I already knew.

Stella died in her sleep. There were no machines unplugged this time, and fewer questions. She was eighty-six, after all. When an eighty-six-year-old dies, it isn't a mystery.

I wrestled with myself in the days to come, as anyone would. Should I report the girl, Rosaria? And tell the administrators what, exactly? That she touched the dying? That she gave them one last smile? That I suspected she was sneaking into their rooms at night? Or that she was Oyá herself coming to call, shepherding her chosen from one realm to the next?

No one listens to our kind, those who are cloistered away from the raging world outside. That is why living here is worse than death, you see. Bingo for the damned? The idea seems brilliant or inane to me, depending on how the meds are tickling my brain that day.

I hate this place.

"I'll never understand you, Gilberto," my young Antoinette says. "You complain about the Bingo game, but you're always first at the door."

Of course I am, and now you see why. I no longer simply watch — I play. I listen closely, and I mark my cards when my numbers are called. I feel my heart leap as the rows fill.

Because she is here today. Rosaria is here. She has not yet shed her human form, but I see the light glowing in embers from her skin. Her

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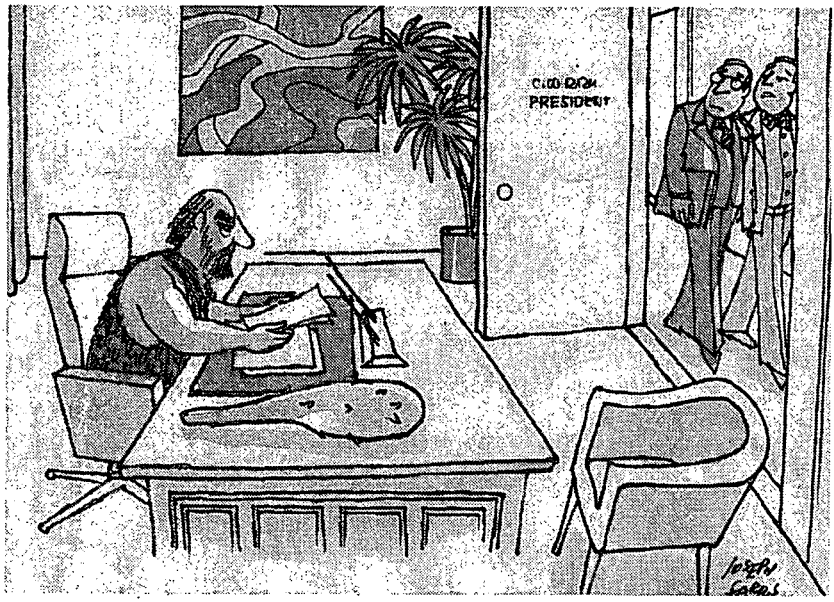
dainty nest of hair will grow. Her white nurse's shoes are mewling against the floor now, but soon her feet will glide on the air itself.

She passes from one table to the next, closer to me. Studying me.

And I am a believer again. Perhaps my *mala suerte* is banished at last. Will my number come up this time? Just this once, Rosaria — this one time — will you give me luck? Will I win?

Bless me. Save me. Choose me.



"He's a Neanderthal executive, but he gets things done."

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John Morressy passed away suddenly in mid-March this year at the age of 75. Fortunately, we had a few of his stories in inventory, including this one, which follows on "The Courtship of Kate O'Farrissey" (Oct/Nov 2004). Your editor has never attended an Irish wake, but he thinks this joyful story is a fine way to remember our friend John.

The Return of the O'Farrissey

By John Morressy

"THE PORRIDGE IS LUMPY," said Conhoon. He moved an investigative spoon around in his bowl and raised it to display proof of his assertion.

His apprentice, Kate O'Farrissey, gave the spoonborne lump a noncommittal look, then returned her attention to her own bowl. "No man ever died of a lump in his porridge," she replied without raising her voice or her eyes.

Conhoon put down his spoon and gave her a hard look, which she ignored. When she persisted in ignoring him, he took up his spoon, and pointing it like a rapier poised for the fatal thrust, said, "My subject is not lumps in the porridge, girl, and you well know it. It's proper attention to the work at hand I'm talking of. Lumps in the porridge is a sign of carelessness and distraction, and for a girl who thinks she'll one day be a wizard, carelessness — "

He fell into shocked silence when without a word or a glance, Kate reached over, snatched his bowl, and proceeded methodically to crush each lump. She then vigorously stirred the contents of the bowl to a

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pleasing creamy uniformity and banged it down on the table under his nose.

"There you are, you great baby. There's your porridge all nice and smooth, and much joy may it bring you," she said.

Conhoon looked at her long and hard. At last, in a tight voice, he said, "The subject is not smoothness of my porridge, either, no more than it is the lumps. The subject is gratitude and respect for the good man who took you in out of the rain and cold when your own father abandoned you to run off with the fairy host. Gratitude toward the kind and generous — "

Folding her arms, she met his eye, unflinching. "And just in time, too, with yourself looking like a tinker's ragbag and birds' nests and yesterday's breakfast stuck in your beard and your house ready to burst with the dirt and the dust and the muck."

"Don't interrupt. The kind and generous man who saw the gift in you and spent years teaching you the way of wizardry and saved you from the life of a drudging skivvy in a — "

"Saved me? Saved me, is it?" Kate sprang up and stood, hands on her hips. Addressing an imaginary audience, she threw her head back and said, "Do you mind the talk of him? He rescued me from being a skivvy in a house full of grand ladies and fine gentlemen so I could be a skivvy in his pigpen of an old shanty."

They exchanged glares in silence for a long time. Finally Conhoon shook his head in disgust and began, "When I was a lad — "

"When you were a lad and worked your hardest, you did less in a month than I do in a morning, and there's been no change in you."

"If I do less in a month than you do in a morning, your father did less in a year than I ever did in a month, and the little he did was for no one's benefit but his own."

"There's the first true words out of your mouth since the three castles of Kilfinney rose out of the sea," Kate said.

It was Conhoon's turn to address the unseen audience. "Will you listen to the way she speaks of her own flesh and blood? It's no wonder she's spiteful to her benefactor. Ah, the O'Farrisseys was always an ungrateful lot," he concluded. With a deep sigh, he settled down to the last of his porridge.

Such morning exchanges were becoming more and more frequent in

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the wizard's household. The very qualities that made Kate O'Farrissey such a promising apprentice made her a source of constant aggravation to the wizard.

Conhoon's concept of an apprentice was a tame and docile soul who trembled at his frown; someone awed by his powers and wisdom, eager to hear his every word, accept his every admonition, meet his every demand, work to exhaustion and beyond without a sigh or a word of complaint, and never question a command or an opinion. Kate O'Farrissey did not fit this description. She was independent, quick-witted, with a tongue like a rasp and unerring skill at verbal abuse.

She was also a most promising apprentice. Kate was a midnight child, born with a talent for magic. She had the gift, there was no doubt of that. Now just barely eighteen, with eight years of study behind her, she was as beautiful as a summer morning and as clever as a cat. This particular morning, the cat's back was up and her claws were out. Conhoon, though indisputably master of his house, had no wish to get in the way of those claws.

When breakfast was over without a further word uttered, Conhoon pushed his empty bowl aside and said, "It's a grand mood you're in this morning, Kate. Is it that the Green Book of Clonaffy is too hard for you?" The look of disdain she gave him was a denial more emphatic than words. "Then maybe you're thinking of that crowd of lovesick ninnies that was after hanging about here crooning your name," Conhoon went on. "They still come back."

"I'll not stop them," she said, giving him a lofty look. "Maybe one day I'll take a fancy to one of them and go off to live like a lady, and not be treated like a great strapping bosthoon of a hired hand."

"You're no lady, you're a wizard's apprentice. Now you've got the pigs to do your work for you, you can study all day long. It's weeping in gratitude you ought to be. Would you throw your gifts away to keep house for some lazy omadhaun?" said the wizard.

In an instant, the cat became an endearing kitten. In a soft voice, Kate said, "Ah, now, Uncle Con, isn't that what what's been troubling myself these past ten days? It's bewildered I am. What am I to do?"

"Do what you're told," said Conhoon. He had learned that Kate sweet and appealing was twice as difficult to deal with as Kate in combat mode.

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She seated herself at the table once more and leaned toward him, her blue eyes wide. "Ten days now I've had a feeling that trouble is about to come into my life, and you going about without a care in the world. Sure, if something bad is at the door, wouldn't you be the first to feel it? But you're as light as the air, not a care to trouble you."

"Something bad? Do you tell me so?" said Conhoon, suddenly interested. Kate's premonitions were not to be lightly dismissed.

"That I do. And I don't know what it is. Will it be a wicked sorcerer? Or some slippery Jackeen with a way to trick me into running off with him? Or a band of thieves who think there's a pot of gold buried in the garden?"

Conhoon's look of interest hardened to one of determination. "It's little enough gold I've got, and I'll not lose it to thieves. I've no fear of enemies. And as for any blackguard who tries to run off with my apprentice...." He growled deep in his throat. "But I've had no warning. I have spells all around to let me know if an enemy is near, and not a whisper of warning have I heard from any of them."

"Maybe the one who's coming has spells of his own," Kate said.

"The worse for him," Conhoon said with a dark frown. "No need for you to worry, girl. Do you stop wasting time on foolishness and get to your studies."

"Easy for you to say," Kate muttered as she turned to leave the kitchen.

There's no gratitude in her, none at all, thought Conhoon. She's like all women. And men are no better. They're all the same, people are. Take her in out of the cold, give her an elegant home and grand food and teach her how to use the magic her mother passed on to her, and what do I get? Lumps in my porridge and bitter words. I give up my peace and quiet and solitude to be like a father to the creature, and not a word of thanks do I get at all. That's women for you. And men are as bad. And children, they're the worst of all. Give them your heart's blood and not a word of thanks do you get out of them.

Conhoon enjoyed a few minutes of highly satisfactory self-pity. Then he patted his belly, which was considerably more substantial than it had been before he had begun to enjoy Kate's cooking on a daily basis. He ran his fingers through his beard, now free of the knots and tangles and

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miscellaneous accumulations of food and debris that had been its adornment before Kate had gotten him into the habit of washing and combing it on a fairly regular basis. The fine linen shirt that he wore had been washed by Kate and laid neatly away in a chest with sweet-scented herbs to keep it fresh-smelling until he was ready to put it on. Thinking of these things, and listening to Kate's sweet voice singing a pretty tune, he confessed to himself — though he would die before admitting it to another living soul — that he had been more than repaid for his gruff and demanding tutelage. He did not dwell on the thought.

Kate paused in the doorway, the large book bound in green leather cradled in her arms. "I'll study in the garden, the way I'll have the fresh air and keep an eye on the chickens," she said, and turned to leave the house. A moment later Conhoon heard her cry of dismay. "Something's coming! I can feel it!" A minute later she cried, "I can see it! It's a man!"

Conhoon was on his feet at once. An intruder who passed unnoticed through his warning spells and caused fear in his apprentice would receive a lesson he would not soon forget. As he reached the door, he saw Kate's trembling hand pointing toward the gate. "It's himself! It's the Da!" she said.

Finbar O'Farrissey, late of the company of The People Outside Us, strutted down the narrow path to the wizard's cottage like the Lord Mayor of Everything on an inspection tour. He twirled a blackthorn stick with airy nonchalance and whistled a sprightly air as he surveyed his surroundings with a proprietary eye. He raised his hat in greeting and beamed upon Conhoon and Kate. His curly hair shone bright as polished copper under the morning sun. His smile revealed perfect teeth and his blue eyes twinkled. The little birds flew from the branches overhead to circle his head and perch on his outstretched fingers, chirping exuberantly. The O'Farrissey was a grand-looking man who with a smile and a phrase could win the hearts of women and the admiration of men, and well he knew it.

And so did Conhoon.

"Peace to all in this house, and isn't it a grand morning in the world when a man finds his long-lost daughter?" he said with a broad smile.

"It's not lost she is, it's discarded," said the wizard, glowering.

O'Farrissey looked at him with wounded eyes. "Ah, now, that's a harsh word. 'Discarded' is a cruel harsh word."

"A harsh word for a harsh deed," said the wizard.

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"It's a great benefaction I did to her, Conhoon, and an honor to yourself. I left my only girl to the care of the wisest man I knew, the way he could teach her and guide her."

"You put her out like you'd put out a cat. Lucky she was to find her way to my door."

"Didn't my Kate always have the sense of direction? And isn't she the grand cook and housekeeper and washerwoman?"

"It's my apprentice she is, and it's work she has to do, and do it now. She needs no distraction from the likes of you. Get you back to your friends in the fairy host."

With a gesture of scornful dismissal, O'Farrissey said, "I'm through with that lot. I've washed me hands of them."

"I'm thinking it's them that did the washing."

O'Farrissey suddenly put a hand to his forehead, staggered a step sideward, and steadied himself against a tree. He leaned heavily on his stick. He shook his head, heaved a deep sigh, and said weakly, "Forgive a man a moment of weakness. It's destroyed I am with the heat and the hunger and the thirst and the travel."

"If it's thirsty you are, there's a ditch full of water under the trees. You can rest in the shade before you go on your way," said Conhoon.

Kate had been observing the exchange in silence, but now she cried, "Would you treat the man like a dog?" She beckoned to her father. "Do you come in and have a sup of milk and a dish of porridge."

"Is it into my house you'd bring him?" Conhoon said.

"And aren't the O'Farrisseys always welcome in the house of Conhoon?"

"Not this one."

"Then why didn't your spells warn you?" When Conhoon paused, trying desperately to think of an answer, she went on, "He's my Da. Would you have me send him on his way?"

"It's no more than he did to you."

Kate looked pained. "Sure, it's no harm to give a man a sup to eat and let him rest for a time."

"It's the thin end of the wedge, girl. Let him get his foot in the door and before the day is over he'll be telling the world he owns the house and all in it, and he'll have you believing him."

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Conhoon's argument did not prevail. Avoiding his eyes, Kate said softly, "He's my Da."

With a quick grin and a tip of his hat to the frowning wizard, O'Farrissey clutched her arm. Leaning on her heavily, he proceeded with many a sigh and groan to guide her toward the cottage.

Conhoon remained outside for a time, reining in his wrath and weighing his options. The situation was complicated, and called for careful handling. His relationship with the clan of the O'Farrisseys went back a century and more, to the time when Kate's great-grandfather Fergus had assisted Conhoon in dealing with a troublesome giant and Conhoon, in return, had helped Fergus win the hand of the most beautiful woman in County Meath. No simple matter of mumbling a love charm, this. He had to protect the couple against the lady's three magical brothers and the twenty-nine kings who were paying court to her at the time. As a result of their shared adventure, a friendship developed between Fergus and the wizard, one of the very few friendships in Conhoon's life. Promises were made.

That friendship and those promises now presented the wizard with a dilemma. He had a good many ideas about the proper way to send Finbar O'Farrissey off in a hurry, never to return; but for the sake of Kate and the memory of old Fergus he restrained himself. Yet he had to do something, and do it without delay. Strong-willed though Kate was, leaving her alone too long in her father's company was sure to turn her resolve into jelly. The man could wheedle a corpse into dancing a jig.

He carefully calculated time for Kate to set out a bowl of porridge and a pitcher of milk, and when it seemed most likely that O'Farrissey's mouth would be harmlessly occupied with food, he advanced on the door. He was still without a plan, but he knew that he must act with dispatch.

Finbar O'Farrissey was seated in Conhoon's own place at the table, half a bowlful of porridge and a pitcher of milk before him. He looked very much the master of the house. Conhoon glared at him, but did not speak.

O'Farrissey savored a spoonful of porridge, wiped his lips, and said, "A fine cozy house you have, Conhoon. Very tidy, and it's no wonder. My Kate was always a great one for the scrubbing and cleaning and dusting. And the cooking and the baking, and all. And the gardening. She thrives

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on work, does Kate. It's no wonder she chooses to stay here and be your apprentice. I don't blame her a bit."

Conhoon, still silent, glanced at Kate to see her reaction to these words. Before she could speak, O'Farrissey went on, "That's her decision, and though it breaks my heart I'll not force her. There's many would call me a fool for not taking her back to our family home where she belongs, the way she'll keep house for her poor lonely father in his declining years, as is every daughter's duty, but I'm a kindly man. 'Live and let live,' says I. 'Choose for yourself,' I tells her. A loving father, that's what I am, and I apologize to no man for considering my darling Kate's happiness before my own fatherly feelings. It's a grand life she has here, bar the hard labor, and I'll not be the man to deprive her of it. I'll content meself with the loneliness and the sorrow."

Conhoon remained silent, as did Kate. So, for a full three minutes, did O'Farrissey, as he gave his attention to the final spoonfuls of porridge. Then, laying aside his spoon with a dramatic gesture and shifting on his stool, he continued.

"All the same, a daughter belongs with her Da. You'll hear no decent man deny that. And I can't shirk me duties. It's a troubled man I've been since I broke free from the clutches of the fairy host. All the way here I was in a quandary, trying to find a way to do the right thing for all concerned. And didn't the grand idea come to me sitting right here at this table. All hope of happiness was gone, thought I. And then not a minute ago it came to me, clear as the light of morning. Do you believe that, now?"

"I do not," said Conhoon.

O'Farrissey favored him with a charming smile. "Here is my plan. You can build me a little cottage out there by the trees, and Kate can go on living here and learning, and come over every day to cook and clean and keep house for me, and see to all me little wants and needs, and never a bit of — "

"Shut your gob," said Conhoon.

O'Farrissey stopped. He looked about, bewildered, and at last said, "Did you speak to me, Conhoon? Is it the old and trusted friend and guardian of the O'Farrisseys who spoke the cruel words I think I heard? Did you — ?"

"I did. Finish your porridge and get you gone."

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O'Farrissey closed his eyes and shook his head as if in disapproval of an unruly child. "Ah, you can't do that, my fine Conhoon. You promised old Fergus that you'd always help the O'Farrisseys."

"And you released me from the promise when you chose to go off with the fairy host and leave your little girl to herself in the world with nothing but a few pigs and a broken-down shanty, and her not eleven years old," said Conhoon in the voice of judgment.

O'Farrissey had to think for a moment, but he quickly recovered. He was not a man to be silenced by simple facts. "Wasn't I all charmed and beglamored by the fairy magic? Is a man responsible for words he spoke under a fairy spell?"

"You were no more spelled than the stool you sit on. You were fair jumping out of your skin to be off with them."

O'Farrissey rose. With a lordly glance around him, he said, "I'll not dispute with a man while I'm a guest in his house. I'll trouble you no more. Come along, Kate."

"Tell him good-bye, Kate," said the wizard.

"She can't. I'm her Da."

"You're a low schemer, O'Farrissey, and I'll — "

"Stop it, the both of you!" Kate cried. She looked at Conhoon, then at her father, then looked at each of them a second time, then burst into tears. "You're tearing me apart! I can't go and I can't stay and I don't know what's to become of me! I should have married when I had the chance, and been shut of you both!"

Conhoon and O'Farrissey turned on one another, red-faced, and simultaneously shouted, "Do you see what you're after doing?!"

As they stood in a frozen tableau, a point of light appeared in the doorway. It quickly grew, and when it was the size of a small person, it began to assume human form. In a sudden blaze of golden light accompanied by a burst of fairy dust, the light winked out and a matronly woman in a pale pink dress appeared before them. Shaking her wand at the two men in an accusatory manner, she demanded, "What have you done to my poor Kate, you brutes?"

"Your poor Kate? She's me daughter!" O'Farrissey cried. His exclamation was nearly drowned out by Conhoon's "She's my apprentice!"

The newcomer silenced them both. "She's my fairy godchild, and I'll

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not have her mistreated. Look at the dear little creature, all distraught and weeping. You should be ashamed of yourselves."

Conhoon, still smarting from his last encounter with Kate's fairy godmother, said, "It's sorry I am for bringing the girl to tears, but I don't need your interference. Haven't you interfered enough with her, trying to trick her into marrying some booby just to clean your slate? Will you hound her for the rest of her days?"

"Since my Kate insists on avoiding the bliss of the married state, I consider myself honor-bound to protect her interests," the fairy godmother said.

"Who is this, with her talk of 'My Kate' and 'protecting her interests'?" O'Farrissey spluttered. "Is a kind and loving father to be deprived of his daughter's care and thrust out into the cold world alone, with no one to care for his comforts? Is that what you'd do to me, woman?"

"A grand idea," said Conhoon. "I'd be glad to lend a hand."

The fairy godmother cocked her head to one side and examined O'Farrissey as one might examine a small distasteful object in one's path. "So you're my Kate's father. You're Finbar O'Farrissey."

"I am."

"Lately associated with the fairy host."

O'Farrissey hesitated before saying, "In a manner of speaking. In a way you might say that."

"Betrothed to the fair Edáin, daughter of Ethal Anbhuail, king of the fairy host, were you not?"

"Ah, now, you don't want to make too much of that talk," said O'Farrissey. "Terrible ones for exaggeration, the fairy host are."

"Oh? Then you were not betrothed to the fairy king's daughter?"

"Well, I was and I wasn't. We had an understanding, the fairy king and the lady and meself. And then we had a misunderstanding, if you take my meaning."

"I take your meaning very clearly. Fortunately, I am acquainted with the truth of the matter. You toyed with the affections of poor Edáin, and when her father refused your outrageous demands for a dowry, like a cold-hearted blackguard you abandoned her."

"Ah, the man has no shame at all," said Conhoon, shaking his head and looking pleased.

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"There were also irregularities surrounding your card playing, were there not? Questions about marked cards and aces up the sleeve?" the fairy godmother asked. "And something about attempts at bribery?"

"Is it true? Are you trying to kill me with the mortification?" cried Kate.

"What we have to do is keep our heads, and not be listening to insinuations. All I need is a chance to gather me thoughts and I'll have an explanation that will please all here," her father said. He had edged his way in the direction of the window until he was almost within one good leap of making his escape.

Conhoon felt a sharp tweak of his warning spell. On the instant, "Not another step!" cried a deep voice from outside. A regal-looking man, splendidly attired, sprang lightly through the open window and pointed an accusing finger at O'Farrissey, who jumped back, pale as whey.

The newcomer stood before the window, blocking O'Farrissey's escape. Hands on his hips, he fixed that trembling man with his black, black eyes, a forbidding expression on his noble features. "It's much you have to explain, Finbar O'Farrissey. My daughter is curious regarding your sudden disappearance. Serious doubts do I have of your intentions toward her. And several of the fairy host are in a wild rage over your unnatural good fortune at games of chance, particularly those involving your own deck of cards."

"And haven't the O'Farrisseys always been known for their good luck?" Finbar replied in a voice unsuited to his proud assertion.

"Glad I am to hear it. You will shortly need all the good luck you can get," said the newcomer with a cold menacing smile.

At this, Kate sprang between them, spreading her arms in a protective gesture. "You'll not harm my Da," she said. "I know who you are, and you're no better than you should be, the lot of you."

"And who's this one?" said the newcomer.

"It's me daughter. Kate, me love, give the king of the fairy host a nice hello. Don't upset His Majesty."

"'His Majesty,' is it? It's a good-bye he'll get from me. Fine manners for a king, lepping through a window and threatening decent people," she replied, her eyes blazing.

Unperturbed, the fairy king said, "I threatened no decent people. I

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threatened a dishonest deceitful rogue who forced himself into my company and proceeded — "

"You carried him off!"

"That is untrue. He begged to join us. He insinuated himself into our midst with every variety of wheedling, flattery, and cajolery known to man. He even offered bribes, which he never distributed. My youngest daughter, an impressionable and foolish girl, was charmed by his wiles, and in a moment of weakness, I — "

Kate rounded on her father. "Is it the truth he's telling?"

"I was bedazzled by the fairy dust. Enchanted. Beglamored. A man's not responsible for his words or his actions when he's in such a state."

"Not a word of truth will you hear from this man," said the fairy king. "I will decide upon the proper punishment for his despicable conduct when we return to the host."

"You'll not take my Da."

"I will take anyone I wish to take."

"You will not."

The fairy king was silent. Through narrowed eyes he studied Kate, more beautiful than ever in her anger. He pondered for a time, and at last said, "No, I will not. I have resolved upon a resolution of our differences which I consider more to our mutual benefit. When the fairy host travel over the length and breadth of this green and lovely isle, we find that having a human in our company enhances our power. This sorry specimen has proven of little benefit to us, and so I am willing to discard him and take another. You, my child, are comely and spirited, and seem to have a slight aura of magic about you. I consider you an acceptable replacement for this wretch. You will come with me now." He extended a hand in an imperious gesture. Kate stood defiant, her arms folded. Her father shrank away.

"She will not," said Conhoon. And to his amazement, Kate's fairy godmother stepped to his side and said, "It's absolutely out of the question. She's not even married."

"What has that to do with it?" the fairy king demanded.

"Everything. I am her fairy godmother, and until she marries I have certain responsibilities for her well-being." She hesitated, then added, with somewhat less warmth, "As does the gentleman at my side, who has acted as her guardian and tutor in her father's absence."

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The fairy king bowed. With a mocking smile, he said, "I congratulate you both on your sense of duty, but I have decided, and a king's decision is irrevocable. She joins the fairy host."

"I will not permit it!" the fairy godmother cried. "I know very well the sort of things she'll learn from the likes of you. You're a disgrace to the rest of us. You're mean and destructive and selfish and cruel. I will not have my Kate associating with that class of fairy."

"Rail on, woman. She comes with me."

Conhoon, who had prudently worked a strong protective spell on Kate and himself while this exchange was in progress, stepped up to the fairy king and poked him hard in the chest. "She stays here, boyo. And if you try any of your fairy tricks, it'll be the worse for you."

He felt a tingling, and saw a startled look in the fairy king's eyes at the failure of his particularly nasty spell. He started to poke him again, harder, and found himself poking empty air.

"He won't trouble you any more, Kate dear," said the fairy godmother with a flourish of her wand.

"What did you do to him?"

"I'm not sure. When one of my girls is in trouble, I can draw upon emergency powers. This is the first time I've had to use them. Do you mind if I sit down? I'm not used to working such magic, and I find it exhausting."

Conhoon drew up a stool. "A grand job you did, too. Have a sup of milk."

"Why, thank you. You were very brave yourself," she said.

"It's grateful I am to you both," said Kate. "I had no wish to go with that one. He had a sly look about him."

"They're all like that," came a voice from under the table. The O'Farrissey emerged, brushing himself off, and said, "We did well to get rid of him."

Not trusting himself to remain civil while in O'Farrissey's protracted company, Conhoon said, "There's too many people in here and too much magic. I'm stepping outside to take a breath."

He left the house. Kate followed close behind and caught up to him. They walked to the gate in silence, and when Conhoon stopped, Kate said, "Uncle Con, the thing I want most in the world is to stay here, the way

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I'll learn to use the gift my mother passed on to me. I can be a wizard, I know. I feel it. But what's to become of my Da?"

"Let him work for a living," said Conhoon.

"Sure, he'd starve in a month. He's no good for work. All he can do is sleep all day and pass the night with a lot of loafers like himself, charming everyone with his blather. He's a fine-looking man, and he could talk the paint off a wall, but he's no use at all."

"And you'd give up your gift for the likes of him?"

"He's my Da," she said softly.

"And you're his daughter, and devil a thing he's ever done for you but go off with the fairy host when you needed him."

"That's his way, Uncle Con. I can't leave him to starve. It's unnatural I'd be to do such a thing."

Conhoon's frustration was mounting. He had always tried to avoid mixing himself in the affairs of people. They were a mad lot, people were, letting their feelings interfere with everything, making silly choices for foolish reasons; and here was Kate, his pupil, acting no wiser than the rest of them. Where had he failed her? Finbar O'Farrissey was a good-for-nothing, and she was willing to give up everything and be his skivvy just because she had the ill fortune to be his daughter. That was people for you.

"He should have stayed with The People Outside Us and married the king's daughter. He deserved her as a wife and the fairy king for his father-in-law," he said.

Kate sighed. "It would have been for the best...but it's unhappy I'd be to have that lot for family."

They were silent, pondering the elegant simplicity of that impossible solution, now forever out of reach. The O'Farrissey considered himself fit consort for a queen, or at least a princess. Charmer though he was, the likelihood of a woman of that class sharing his estimate seemed remote.

"I have to go with him," said Kate. She slipped her arm through Conhoon's. They turned their slow footsteps toward the cottage. As they neared the door, they heard the sound of lively conversation, followed by a burst of laughter, both masculine and feminine. They exchanged a look of surprise and by tacit agreement stopped by the doorway to eavesdrop.

The fairy godmother's voice was soft and her words indistinct, but

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O'Farrissey boomed out in fine round tones. "Ah, that one doesn't bother me at all. He's as old as mud and twice as nasty, but it's all words. Me daughter's as good at the magic as he is, and her at it only a handful of years."

The fairy godmother's response was too soft to hear. Conhoon's was wild; he looked as if he were about to explode. "Do you hear the words out of him? In my own house, and him after enjoying my hospitality?" he said to Kate in a strangled whisper. "Oh, I'll show him nasty." He made to enter the house.

She held him back. "Pay no mind. He never had a good word for anyone. It's his way."

"And would you have me stand out here, and him sitting on my own stool at my own table in my own house and belittling me?"

"I'd have you wait and see what the fairy godmother's up to. She's a cute one."

"So is he."

Kate favored him with a knowing smile. "I've seen the fairy godmother work. He's no match for her."

Conhoon grumbled, but acceded. Listen as they might, they could not make out much of the fairy godmother's part of the conversation, but whatever she was saying was obviously much to O'Farrissey's liking. "She sounds like a grand woman entirely," he said, "And rich besides? Three castles, you say?" and later, "A great beauty? Do you tell me so? And her a poor lonely widow these two years? A pity it is I was off with that band of thieving fairies — no offense to yourself, lady — and her alone and grieving, bereft of companionship and consolation and the love of a fine man like meself."

Conhoon and Kate exchanged a glance and a nod, and entered the house. The fairy godmother greeted them with a charming smile, and the O'Farrissey allowed a condescending wave of his hand.

"Kate, dear, your father and I have been having the most amusing conversation," said the fairy godmother. "Why didn't you tell me he was such a charming gentleman? And so considerate."

Kate gave Conhoon a quick wink. He forced himself to remain silent. The fairy godmother continued as O'Farrissey looked on, basking in the warmth of her words. "I told him the sad history of the Widow McGuffin,

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poor lorn creature. She longs for the comforting presence of a sympathetic man with wit and charm. And Finbar is so handsome, besides!"

"The O'Farrisseys was always a comely family," he said. "The better class of people can't keep away from us. It's like bees to honey they are."

"All her neighbors and tenants say the Widow McGuffin is the loveliest woman in the West, and her wealth beyond counting. Land, cattle, sheep, horses, carriages, servants, castles, cottages, and all of it for the man who wins her hand. But she can't seem to find the right one."

The dreamy expression on O'Farrissey's face suggested that the right one was already composing a mental inventory of the widow's worldly goods. "For Kate's sake, the lady here will give me a personal introduction. Bedad, we'll be married before the summer's out."

"I hope you have no objection, Kate. Since you show no inclination to marry, I thought I'd offer my services to another member of the family."

"I'll not object to making a lonely woman happy, fairy godmother."

"Well then, if you don't mind, we'll be on our way. The widow is sure to be surrounded by suitors of high rank and great wealth, and the sooner she meets dear Finbar the sooner she can settle down to a happy new life," said the fairy godmother with a maternal smile on the O'Farrissey.

Kate took her father's hand. "Come into the other room, the way I'll brush your coat and your hat and put a polish on your shoes."

"Don't be broken-hearted, Kate. I'm only doing what a man ought to do for a widow woman. Conhoon is a decent man, and you're learning a useful trade. Your Da will be thinking of you every day, though he's far away, working hard on his estate," said Finbar as they left the room.

"And good riddance to him," muttered Conhoon.

"Now, don't be cross," said the fairy godmother. "I think things have worked out very well. Kate will stay here, as she wishes. I'll make a marriage for an O'Farrissey, as I ought. And the Widow McGuffin will have a fine-looking husband."

Conhoon shook his head slowly. "There's no justice in it. I pity the poor Widow McGuffin for the man you're tying her to. Finbar O'Farrissey will spend his days wasting her riches. It's ashamed you should be of the whole business."

"Neither pity nor shame is appropriate. The lady is quite wealthy, it's true, and her tenants and neighbors all praise her beauty. But they may be

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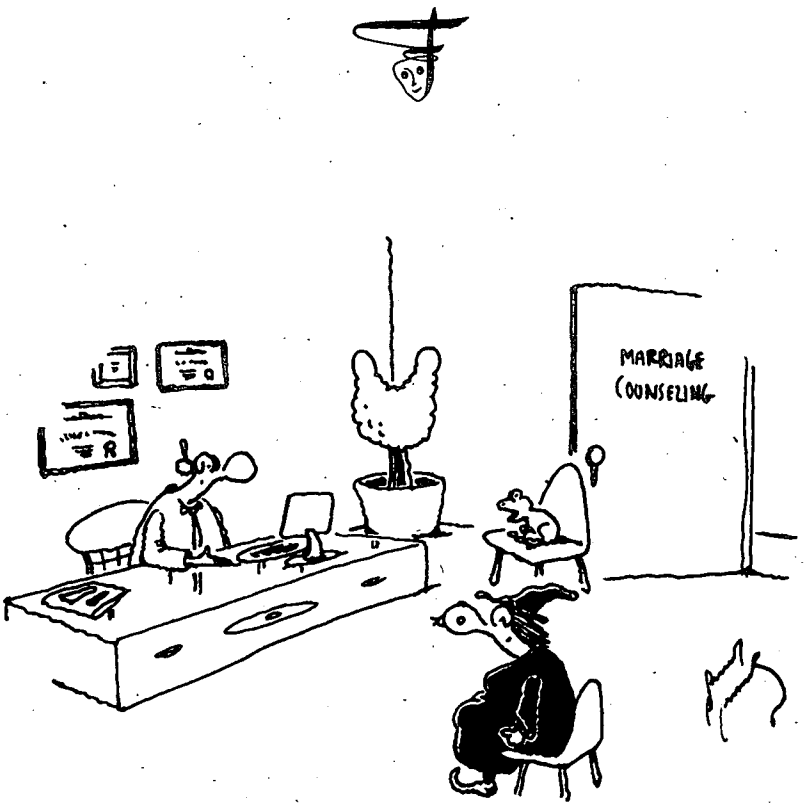
influenced in their opinion by the fact that she's the tallest, strongest woman in six counties. She is said to have a terrible temper."

Conhoon's frown softened. "Is she, now?"

"She is. She is known locally as 'The Iron Widow.' I am told it is a particularly apposite sobriquet."

They exchanged secretive little smiles. "Fairy godmother," said Conhoon, "You're a woman after me own heart."



"I want to take the magic out of our marriage."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

High School Bites, by Liza Conrad, NAL/Jam Books, 2006, $9.99.

I CAME UP with a list as I was reading this book:

Set in a high school? Check.

Which is plagued by Goth vampires? Check.

The hero has a legacy in which she is the chosen one who must combat the vampires? Check.

But she didn't get the proper training and so is ill-prepared to fulfill her legacy? Check.

Sounds a bit like a recent, much-missed TV series, doesn't it?

But I'm being a little unfair. Yes, *High School Bites* bears some superficial similarities to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but Liza Conrad uses her own palette so that the familiar elements come out more as her own than as copies of Joss Whedon's work.

There's lots to like about the novel. Our protagonist Lucy — descendent of *that* Lucy, from Stoker fame — has a breezy voice in her first person narrative, and if she doesn't have experience with these new responsibilities thrust upon her on her sixteenth birthday, she does have pluck and a quick mind.

Which comes in handy, since she's immediately thrust into one dangerous situation after another. She makes mistakes because of her inexperience, and her agoraphobic father's not much help either. But she has her best friend Mina (again, no coincidence with the name) to help her, and finds allies in unexpected places — and shapes.

Younger readers will get a kick out of the book, but older ones — especially those who have some familiarity with Bram Stoker's *Dracula* should enjoy the way that Conrad has woven elements from that classic novel into this very contemporary, and youthful, setting of hers. I don't want to point any out in particular, because that

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would spoil your fun, but I certainly enjoyed myself.

Of course, there's always the chance that sticklers will be offended at Conrad's very liberal use of the descendents from Stoker's book, but that will be their problem.

The Sisters Grimm: The Fairy-Tale Detectives, by Michael Buckley, Amulet Books, 2005, $14.95.

The Sisters Grimm: The Unusual Suspects, by Michael Buckley, Amulet Books, 2005, $14.95.

There's a strong sense of familiarity underlying this series as well, although this time it takes its cue not from a television series, but from the comic *Fables* by Bill Willingham — which always struck me as getting *its* inspiration from the original *Shrek* film where we're told that all the denizens of fairy tales have escaped to some undisclosed elsewhere when the evil adversary shows up.

In *Fables*, many of the familiar characters end up in New York City, and a farm in Upstate New York (the ones that can't pass as human). In *The Sisters Grimm* series, they've taken up residence in the small town of Ferryport — still in New York State, but this idyllic town on the Hudson River is a far cry from the mean streets of the Big Apple.

The title characters are two sisters: Sabrina, the elder, and Daphne. They're not quite orphans, but have been made wards of the State upon the disappearance of their parents before the first book opens.

Life has not been good for them as they're shuffled from one foster home to another. But then an unknown relative — their grandmother on their father's side, who's supposed to be dead — makes contact with the authorities, and off the girls are sent to live with her. Which is how they end up in Ferryport.

Sabrina, her younger sister's only protector, is suspicious of the seemingly kind old woman, her companion Mr. Canis, and her huge dog Elvis. No sooner do they land in Mrs. Grimm's house, than she's planning their escape. But Daphne likes it here because she feels safe, and she does trust their new family. She feels part of a normal life again.

But it soon appears that neither Mrs. Grimm nor Ferryport are normal. Nor is the sisters' lineage. It turns out that they are the descendents of the Brothers Grimm whose collections of fairy tales are not

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stories, but histories. And the Grimms are detectives, seeing to the welfare of both humans and Everafters (which is what the fairy tale people call themselves).

Sabrina's distrust vanishes when their grandmother is kidnapped by a giant and it's up to the two girls, and a decidedly pain-in-the-butt Robin Goodfellow, to rescue her.

If *High School Bites* was for the Young Adult reader, *The Sisters Grimm* skews a bit younger. Again, older readers familiar with fairy tales will get a kick out of seeing the characters in new guises, but the writing, characterization, and plot are definitely aimed at the younger reader. Which isn't a bad thing. We need younger readers to bring some fresh blood to the graying genre audience.

And you might surprise yourself by forgetting your age and enjoying it. It's fast-paced and fun, simple, but not simplistic.

The Unusual Suspects is more of the same, starting with the girls dealing with an ongoing series of thefts in Gepetto's toyshop and going on to having to solve a murder in their school. This book is a little darker, but mostly as much fun as the first — at least it is until the last three pages. At that point, having already finished the story in hand, the author decides to go on and build in a cliff-hanger to the next book.

Having already done so in a previous column, I'm not going to repeat at length my dislike for this sort of thing, except to restate that it's especially irksome when there's no indication anywhere on the book that the story is incomplete. All this does is show us an author with no respect for his audience.

For this reason, I don't recommend anything but the first book to you, and even then, it's with some reluctance.

Vampire Kisses by Ellen Schreiber, HarperCollins, 2003, $15.99.

Vampire Kisses 2: Kissing Coffins by Ellen Schreiber, HarperCollins, 2005, $15.99.

Ellen Schreiber plays no such unprincipled trick on her readers. Her books are stand-alone delights, from start to finish.

In *Vampire Kisses* we meet the only Goth in Dullsville, Raven Madison, who, when asked by her kindergarten teacher what she wants to be when she grows up, replies "A vampire."

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Although raised by yuppified hippies, and with a nerd for a brother, Raven remains uninfluenced by her home environment and retains her enthusiasm for the night and the romantic denizens she imagines populate it. School and the boring town she lives in don't have much of an affect either — she's happy to be an outsider.

But then strangers move into the supposedly haunted house on Benson Hill, which has stood vacant and boarded up for years, and as the new owners remain elusive (they only come out at night, ask to have garlic removed from an order at the local Italian restaurant), talk begins around town that they're... yes, vampires. They even have a reclusive son, Alexander Sterling, handsome, pale, and homeschooled, who Raven spies standing at the attic window.

Naturally, she has to meet him....

Over and over again, throughout this book, when you're sure you know where the plot is going to go, Schreiber takes you somewhere else — but always logically within the context of her story. Her point of view character Raven has an utterly charming voice — she's like the older sister of Emily the Strange. Not quite as antisocial, but certainly as opinionated.

It's not a deep, dark read, so it might be too light for a die-hard Goth, but it's not dull by any means.

Kissing Coffins, the second book, is just as good, but I'm not going to tell you anything about it beyond that because whatever I say will spoil the first book for you.

I highly recommend both titles.

There's a third book forthcoming, but I wasn't able to get a copy in time for this column. If Schreiber's track record so far is anything to go by, *Vampireville* will be well worth checking out.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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MUSING ON BOOKS

MICHELLE WEST

Vellum , by Hal Duncan, Del Rey, 2006, $14.95.

His Majesty's Dragon, by Naomi Novik, Del Rey, 2006, $7.50

IT'S BEEN A long time since I've come across a book like *Vellum*, the astonishing first novel by Hal Duncan. Actually, I don't think there *is* a book like it, but let me explain what I mean by that: I read the book, and after I closed the covers the first time, I felt compelled to go back over it, examining the parts that make up the whole, to try to absorb more of the subtleties embedded in its fractured narrative.

Vellum is entirely engaging on an intellectual level, but if it were only that, I wouldn't have gone back to it again. To go by the prologue, from the two simple and eloquent words "people die," the book itself seems straightforward enough. Friends, mortality, dreams of a universal font of knowledge — human nature broken into bits, each convincing enough to reveal the depth of author observation, the little gestures, the things said and unsaid that make characters more than the words used to draw them. Four friends, Puck (neé Thomas), Joey, Jack, and Guy, in university, living simple lives.

Guy Reynard has believed all his life in *The Book of All Days*, and he knows where it will be found, where it *can* be found, and he does, indeed, collect it from its home beneath glass in the university library. So far, so good.

Guy Reynard's book begins a journey, and it's natural to expect somehow that the book that follows will reflect that. It does. Sort of.

But that's the prologue, and the book starts with the myth of Inanna, and then turns to the story of Phreedom, twisting back and forth between the narrative of myth and the very contemporary voice of a

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girl on the edge of adulthood who is trying to discover who she is in a future world that has little to do with Guy and his circle of friends. She and her brother, Thomas, live in a commune of sorts, with parents who were once hippies. And they come to Finnan, a man who won't speak of his past, but who fixes odds and ends that break down, and lives in a trailer. This, by the way, is so much less straightforward in the narrative; the force of the myth overlying the story of the girl feels like a Kelly Link short, with its weft of words and its echoes, and its unusual structural weight.

Thomas leaves the family. His sister misses him, waits, and knows on some level that he won't be coming back, but she continues to visit Finnan, the gruff, dirty wise man on the edge of their lives. Finnan has always seen in Thomas and Phreedom something *other*, some glimmer of a truth that their parents don't possess, and he's willing to guide them, carefully, into the unknown.

Phreedom's life is changed the day she first meets the Angel. When she meets the Angel, she first truly hears the Cant, the song and the language that underlie all things with a power that simple words don't have. Finnan seems to know the Angel, and the Angel to know Finnan. The Angel calls Finnan unkin, and tells him that the unkin are being called upon to choose a side in the War. Finnan refuses, because he's seen war before and he doesn't much care for what it does to the soldiers.

The Angel recognizes that Phreedom is touched by the same strangeness that touches Finnan, that she is more than human but not yet awakened. And he tells her his hidden name. His true name. She uses it, to both his shock and Finnan's, to drive him from Finnan's trailer.

Afterward, Phreedom asks Finnan to grave upon her what he sees in her, and he gives her her true name, her identity, the truth of her being, awakening her to her life as one of the unkin — the immortals who can traverse the Vellum — the fabric upon which reality is written, as god commanded. He then disappears after spending one night with her. And Phreedom disappears to find her missing brother.

And the myth of Inanna, who went to visit her sister, the Queen of the dead, continues as Phreedom winds her way across possibilities, realities, earths that are ours and not ours, as she learns that time is

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not linear in the Vellum. That life is both more and less than it appears.

The Angels want to rewrite the world in their own shining image: a thing of glory and justice and truth. But they have flaming swords and little care for what gets destroyed in the process, because what will replace it will be so much better. And their enemies? The fallen, the so-called demons, the warlords.

She finds the Queen of the dead, at last, in a tattoo parlor in a shady part of some town, and accepts the choice offered her: she wants to follow her brother. She must remain hidden from the Angels with their Book of Names. She has to choose a different name. She chooses the name Inanna.

The graving of a dead, lost god. What, after all, were the unkin but gods? And what is death, in the Vellum, when the Vellum holds everything?

The story of Guy Reynard continues, as he reads his book of maps and wanders for years beyond count through the worlds of the Vellum. It's there that he meets his Puck, his Thomas, or someone who looks much like him; there that he learns that he doesn't have to be alone; if he can scribe some name or some description of the people he approaches, they don't simply vanish when he comes too close. He is winding his way to somewhere, the journey more important than the arrival.

Intertwined with this are other Guy Reynards, other Guy Foxes, and other Thomases; there are other Jacks and other Joeys. There are other Finnans — Seamus Finnan, bound to rock and condemned to suffer there for the crime of giving fire to man, of thieving from the gods. Yes, myth again, and myth is both more than allegory and entirely allegory.

The war is in place, the Angels have gathered, and the fallen, and there is a third force loose in the world, unleashed by the death of, well, death. Unleashed by the unkin and free in the Vellum.

This is not a simple narrative, and structure is to me what shiny objects are to magpies. The structure of this book itself breaks after the prologue.

It's almost as if someone has taken a mirror, shattered it by dropping it on a perfect, obsidian floor, and then taken the narrative from the shards, picking up pieces, seemingly at random, and writing about them in the order they're retrieved. It isn't a pointless exercise; they're attempting to rebuild the mirror itself, and they know the pieces

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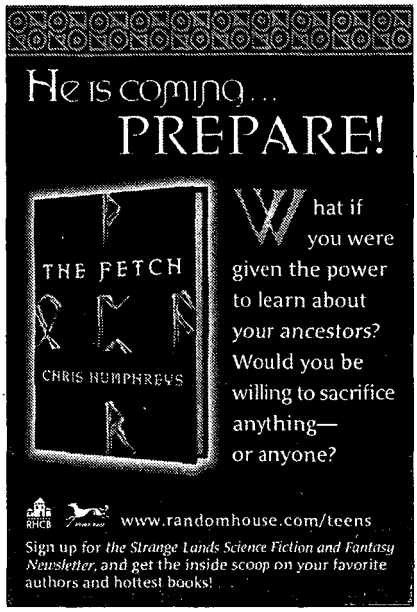
have to go in a certain way; they know how to put it together.

But we don't. We read it, we watch, we see the light as it begins to be reflected while the shards are put together. But at the end, at the end, what we have is a mirror strewn with cracks; we look at ourselves and see a broken reflection, something as true as a reflection can be from something so fractured, so faceted.

This book made me work, it made me think, it moved me in places to pity and even to the sense of wonder that I felt when I first approached fiction that had so little to do with the mundane. I'm still thinking about it; I still return to it; it lingers in the mind, in quiet times, and I can't quite leave it alone. It will not be for everybody, but it's striking, the language certain, the observations acute. Read it. Tell me what you think.

Naomi Novik's first novel, *His Majesty's Dragon*, is as different a book as you're likely to find. If you like Napoleonic, this is the book for you. If you like dragons, this is the book for you. If you like well-written, sympathetic characters, this is *also* the book for you. If you like military fantasy, this — yes, you know the drill. This is the book for you. In fact, of all the fantasies to come along in recent years, this is pretty much the very happy kitchen sink for readers — I think it has something for everyone. It's not the intellectual tangle that *Vellum* is, but frankly, it's a far more relaxing read; it has a little bit of everything.

Captain Will Laurence, with a crew under his command, intercepts a French ship. They carry a cargo of significant import: a dragon egg. Dragons are used by the feared, shunned, and desperately needed aviators — the men and women who keep Britain's air space safe, in the way the navy keeps its waters


He is coming...
PREPARE!
THE FETCH
CHRIS HUMPHREYS
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safe. It's not a life that's respected, for aviators must live apart from the rest of society, for fear that their dragons might somehow escape and eat everything in sight that moves, including people. It's certainly not the life for a gentleman.

But Captain Laurence realizes that someone must take responsibility for the dragon, lest it go wild and feral, and names are drawn to see who that unfortunate is. The drawn name, however, is not the dragon's choice. And in the end, a man well-situated in life, a captain at last of his own ship, must take on the responsibility and leave the life he loves in order to fulfill it.

There is much that is moving in this book, and the turn of phrase and formality of much of the interaction is bang on without pushing the boundaries of the accessible for a contemporary audience. There is much that is clever, and much that is historical — and it all falls together so perfectly, it's hard to believe that this is a first novel.

But it is, and it's a joy of a first novel, a wonderful take on dragons, on those who fly them, and on the relationship that unfolds. Not quite the McCaffrey dragons, and certainly not the bestial terrors of other books, this is about the relationship that develops between Temeraire and his pilot.

This is the kind of book that you *want* to spoil; you want to bounce up and down about it. Instead of sinking you into a quiet well of deep thought, it makes you want to squeal. Well, I mean, if you're younger than me. It's perfect escapism, but as in all perfect escapism, it has things to say about society and people that bear reading, and it is never heavy-handed.

Go go go. Read it and enjoy.

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Matthew Corradi made his professional debut as a fiction writer with "Journey to Gantica" in this year's January issue. Now he returns with a dense and rewarding science fiction story. He says this story originated one night when he watched gecko lizards gather on the frosted bathroom window of his Arizona home. At first, he thought they were attracted to the light. Then he realized his assumption was wrong, and that sparked this story.

The Song of Kido

By Matthew Corradi

THEY WERE FOUR DAYS OUT from Qidrit with no sign of a *kigrin* on the vids. The guide drank too much, the airboat's buoyancy tanks leaked, and the Song of Kido constantly caressed Jax Ridimon's deepest fears. Maybe Ridimon was making a mistake, maybe his quest was more about suicide than finding a cure, but he didn't care. He was reckless.

Toward sunset the alarm went off and the airboat's neural processor popped up three vid-screens showing broadband movement. On the visible spectrum monitor Ridimon could make out a tail, branches bending, and a slick, slithering neck. A thrill ran through him as a serpentine body emerged from the waters around a *kidaah* tree. Wings unfurled, transparent and vein-laced, and then a sleek, diamond head swiveled around and looked directly at the sensor, directly at the *camera* on the sensor, *directly at Ridimon*. Ridimon jumped out of his chair and yelled for Phidrik, but Phidrik was already shooting the airboat across the treetops of the Canopy, following the processor's triangulation. In a matter of seconds Phidrik circled a small seam in the foliage, anchored the

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airboat, and dropped them through the Canopy in the two-man skiff.

But underneath the interlaced treetops, in the mists of the swamp, the *kigrin* was gone. Phidrik found a tail trace straddled by tracks, and bent fronds, and claw marks in fen-moss. He followed the trace across the mud, sometimes leaning over the prow of the skiff while Ridimon steered, other times hopping from spot to spot, stepping as if weightless across sludge and slime and quick-mire.

Soon Ridimon felt the choker mists growing thicker, and then a heaviness pressed on his chest. Phidrik's discordant voice faded in and out, and Ridimon turned up the cross-chatter in his earpiece until it hurt, but still the Song grew and solidified in his mind.

More shattered hulls, swimming through decks of melted metal, the blue cold of vacuum, the frost of death. Looking for the officers, for the captain, seeing only bodies floating, puffed and cracked, blood drifting. What are the questions? Impossible to remember. The voices begin, a scream, a whimper, bitterness and shock, and most of all — regret. They rise to a wail of anguish from the still, purple mouths and icy eyes of murdered men.

Ridimon awoke on a cot on the deck of the airboat. Phidrik's raspy singing accompanied the drone of the ion engines and the erratic ticking of the airboat's neural processor. Phidrik had brought Ridimon back to the boat and did not question his lapse under the Song's spell.

Fear shot through Ridimon. He said to Phidrik, "You could have killed me. Dumped my corpse in the swamps."

Phidrik stopped singing and swiveled in his pilot's chair. A lack of any body hair made his green skin a natural canvas for the spidery tattoos that ran over his skull and down the back of his neck. Ridimon could read nothing in the guide's flat, black eyes. After a slight delay from the translator implant, Phidrik cracked a smile and said, "Ah, but it's bad for business to kill off customers, yes? Besides...I like your Song."

"What do you care about my Song?"

"It's arranged in a whole different key than most, yes?"

Phidrik spoke in native Kido, a slippery language full of blended sibilance that came through even in translation. Ridimon didn't quite

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trust the cheap dialect interface he had downloaded into his neural translator back in Qidrit. Maybe Phidrik was speaking in analogies, or maybe the translator was having trouble processing into Imperium-Standard.

Ridimon decided not to care, for he was reckless. How else to describe seeking the cure to his curse from a super-sentient alien in the equatorial swamps of a backwater planet in a far forgotten corner of the galaxy? And hiring this Kido drunk to be his guide and hunter? *Reckless.*

Phidrik's airboat was a patchwork of rusting metal eaten away by countless years of swamp fog. The buoyancy tanks were sealed with mismatched salvage panels, and the aft steering fins looked ready to snap off in a slight breeze. Ridimon wondered how the craft continued to float in the empty air above the Canopy. Phidrik occasionally walked the observation deck encircling the upper hull, but mostly he sat in the open pilot's cabin, analyzing the readings relayed from the large array of sensor poles strategically placed among the breather bogs just south of the Qidrit River. Grid arrays were for pretenders, Phidrik claimed; *kigrin* were large creatures, but they could still sneak through broad grids and bypass tight grids. Phidrik preferred to gamble on a combination of acoustic and low-spectrum linear arrays set perpendicular to the *phistrii* ridges feeding the bogs. Initial detection of a *kigrin* was maximized, extended sensor surveillance was limited, and tracking became the skill of a man reading the swamp rather than vidscreens.

Ridimon felt the pull of the Song each time he and Phidrik dropped below the Canopy into the swamps, and it was a struggle to resist. What exactly *was* the Song? The absolute locals in Qidrit had laughed at the question. Perhaps it was the blood of the planet coursing through twisted trees, they said, or whimsical swamp spirits teasing gullible souls.... But where there was Song there were *kigrin*, and legend claimed that the *kigrin* of Kido held knowledge beyond the comprehension of man. Maybe they even knew of a cure for Ridimon's curse.

Yet knowledge was not without danger, for the Song of Kido sought to lay bare your soul and consume it whole.

Toward sunset they dropped down in the skiff again to pull a sensor

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line. Ridimon held the skiff in place while Phidrik pulled a transmission head off a pole. The warped, twisted trunks of countless *kidaah* trees rose up toward the underside of the Canopy, and slick branches with thin, wet leaves hung back down like groping tentacles. It had been such a long time since Ridimon had actually dropped planet-side, so many years in the cold, hard guts of a hyper-c hauler. Here the unfiltered air was too thick; the moisture in every breath was the collective exhalation of the swamps, dank and enveloping. It was all so alien that, before he could even reach up to adjust the static in his earpiece, Ridimon's stomach churned and his vision blurred.

Tubes sweaty with condensation, the drip of serum, needles, cyclic pumps, worried faces looking down. Then the whispered questions: What is the enemy transport route through Talus field? How many frigates, battleships, cruisers? What drive speeds, what photomic vectors? Destination, raid pattern, target objective? Time then, waiting.... Impatience in those faces, and fear, until a grating on the mind like jagged iron, a crack through the brain like the snap of a bone. And finally the halting answers: a hundred frigates, a thousand men, a hundred-thousand regrets, countless dreams, joy, laughter, all gone.

THE SONG was unique for all individuals, and for the moment Ridimon found his version to be composed of memories; but the memories were fresh and raw, like filleted nerves. And when Ridimon came to consciousness again the Song lingered painfully in his head. Ridimon knew Phidrik could hear his Song, but Ridimon ventured no explanation, and Phidrik asked for none. It was sacred Kido tradition that a Guildsman would never ask of what he learned — nor tell of it.

Now Phidrik was singing bawdy tunes of Farassi pirate women as he manned the helm of the airboat, and Ridimon wondered how a backwater Kido native in absolute time knew songs from a thousand years past and a hundred systems away. Phidrik claimed that interpretation of molecular sound waves distracted the human mind from the Song of Kido. Ridimon found that the random-chatter static fed through the translator implant in his ear seemed more effective. Phidrik also offered him Orestie rum,

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claiming that alcohol made the mind slippery and tougher for the Song to grasp. Ridimon declined.

Phidrik himself was somehow immune to the Song. It did not sing to him, or if it did, he tuned it out. And that allowed him to hear the Song of others. While Phidrik was as human as Ridimon, at least within the genetic scope of recent OutRim breeding, he was probably descended from modified Calamite stock. So perhaps he had an edited cerebral chemistry, or an adaptive aural processing mutation in his derivative Kido lineage. Or perhaps, as Phidrik claimed, immunity from the Song was just willpower, whiskey, and the favor of the swamp spirits.

That night, on the fifth day out from Qidrit, Ridimon heard a cry from the swamps — a single, lonely wail of despair. It rose from the darkness below the Canopy and clamped an icy hand over Ridimon's heart. He knew he had heard that cry before, a cry full of pain, the same cry that had sent him fleeing through space and time.

At first Phidrik claimed not to hear anything at all, but Ridimon could tell Phidrik was lying. Then Phidrik casually suggested that there were often TransCom gas miners from Qidrit in the swamps, and sometimes they got lost.

"We should go down and help them," Ridimon said.

"You want to join them in their agony, yes?" Phidrik asked. "No help for them if they're lost in the swamps."

Ridimon pretended to accept that, and returned to the neural processor to monitor the sensors. But he was not satisfied, especially because there was no trace of any cry or wail in any molecular sound frequency, and the only electromagnetic signature was the infrared passage of a swarm of bog flies moving to the east. And yet, even in the belly of the airboat, Ridimon could still hear the cry. At first he tried to deny it, to ignore it, but his heart pounded, his hands trembled, and his determination wavered.

It was his curse.

Brother, sister, friends in shared misery, hooked to the same tubes, dripping pumps. They wait until the next mission, the next hull full of moaning corpses. Then fire, roaring wind and melting metal. Screams of the living turn to screams of the dead. The men with the questions

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floating by, hanging in blood, worried faces now bloated. Brother, sister, friends in shared misery drifting in vacuum, crying and — yes, regretting. Escape, rescue, flight.

Ridimon awoke again aboard the airboat, just before dawn. Phidrik sat at the helm, humming an Imperium marching tune, and from below, in the swamps, rose the wail and moan of what Ridimon knew without a doubt was a dead soul. He buried his face in his hands. His life until then had been an escape from the dead. It took every bit of courage he had not to run away again.

Back in Qidrit, Phidrik had seemed to be a typical absolute local, reserved and steeped in the dignified Kido tradition — a Guildsman to whom *kigrin* were demi-gods of knowledge and to whom the hunting of a *kigrin* was a sacred ritual shared only cautiously with relative spacers from off-world. Now he slouched at the helm of the airboat, charting their progress on the spectrum-grids as he knocked back Orestie rum and spun tall tales of Quitsitt warlords. He asked about the worlds Ridimon had visited, the Imperium protectorates, trans-Gate merchant fortunes, power lost, power found, alcohol consumed. His mind seemed to wander in random directions while searching for conversation; sometimes it was itchy and edgy, sometimes longing and lonely.

Ridimon didn't care to answer, for even without translator lag conversation was a lost art to him. Phidrik answered his own questions anyway, telling Ridimon that Imperium citizens were vindictive, and trans-Gate fortunes were best built from specialty art and artifacts that were unaffected by hyper-c time divergence. Power these days was lost in politics, or religion; but power was found in hyper-c infrastructure. And, of course, there was nothing sweeter in the universe than a pint of Orestie rum.

In the afternoon another alarm whistled, and they dropped in the skiff. As Ridimon spotted a thrashing in the leaves of a *kidaah* tree Phidrik jammed the throttle forward, and the chase was on. Ridimon crouched for protection under the front windshield, nearly falling out when Phidrik jerked the skiff around a breather bog and did a full-throttle back-cross

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into the *kigrin*'s path. Ridimon caught a brief glimpse of flat, dead eyes and needle-like talons as the *kigrin*'s serpentine body snapped around itself to change direction. Somehow it slithered through the air almost faster than the eye could see.

Phidrik cursed as he fired a charge from the mesh harpoon. The net missed and Phidrik accelerated the skiff forward again. Leaves and vines and branches slashed by them as they wove in and around the trees. When they topped a dense *phistrii* ridge, a wail suddenly streaked by the skiff, and another, and another, and then Ridimon thought it wasn't branches slashing at him, but rather invisible arms and hands, all cold and dead, all reaching and groping for him. His vision blurred and the sounds of the pursuit receded to a dull roar.

Jump. Lack of life is lack of death. Contraband cargo and droning photomic drives, crank the combine valves, mind the meters, dance the blend to the detonation line, deny the boredom. Alone in the dark of the fusion deck, avoid the captain, avoid the jibes, avoid the humiliation. Jump. A blue planet through a porthole, teeming in dead, another captain, another choice, another excuse. A timeless toll, a hollow soul. Jump.

The next day, after Ridimon had recovered again, Phidrik said, "We should go back, if you value your life." The neural processor steered the airboat while Phidrik swung in a hammock up at the prow, nursing his bottle.

Though he was afraid of the answer, Ridimon asked why.

"Because you're a coward, yes."

When Ridimon showed no emotional response Phidrik scowled and added, "Because I've been listening to your Song for the past five days. I know you're running from the dead, some war, a battle that showed you how different you are. Cursed to hear the dead. I tell you that's dangerous, because where you want to go, in the swamps, the dead swarm like bog flies."

Ridimon's heart pounded. And still, still.... *Reckless*. Ridimon said, "I hear cries, in my mind. The cries of dead souls."

"I know."

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"From where? Qidrit?"

"From Qidrit, from every other mining town on the planet. The Song that draws living things into the swamps, it's just a byproduct, a faint echo of a larger Song that attracts all things dead and gone."

"Why? What is this Song, what creates it?"

Phidrik shrugged, the same shrug the other locals had given Ridimon when he first arrived on the planet. Ridimon couldn't decide if Phidrik truly didn't know or was merely unwilling to tell. Phidrik took a long drink and looked sadly at the bottle, as if he longed to crawl into it, or as if it held the cure Ridimon sought. He asked, "How does an Imperium human like you hear the dead? A natural thing, is it? A gift of birth, yes?"

Ridimon prepared to lie, but instead he said, "It was the end of the Third Imperium, when the war turned and the Neroxan separatists invaded the OutRim. The Emperor sold prisoners to the Defense Ministry's gen lab. A lot of us were direct Terran stock, with a clean genetic code."

Phidrik whistled through his teeth. "Not many of you left."

Ridimon continued, "The gen lab was desperate enough to experiment with neuromatic engineering. Psionic amplification. Esper gates. Or magic. Hocus-pocus, whatever the hell it was. They wanted to send us into wrecked ships after battle, to find dead Neroxan officers, pry information from their souls — plans, strategy, tactics."

Phidrik said, "Strategy means nothing to a dead man."

"You think I don't know that?" Ridimon's voice weakened. "The tides turned, the Neroxans attacked. Few of us escaped."

After a long pause Phidrik said, "Death scares you, yes?"

"Death scares everyone."

"Maybe. But most people only think about it in passing. Only when it plucks an acquaintance, a friend, a lover."

"Yeah, well, I live it every day. The dead are all around, the dead from ten thousand years of human existence — and ten thousand millennia of *non*-human existence."

"Ever talk to them?"

"I try not to."

Phidrik hissed. "So just ignore them."

"I can't. I...." Ridimon hesitated, then said, "I've never met a dead soul that wasn't full of...regret."

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Phidrik laughed, as if mocking Ridimon. "So you've spent the last thousand absolute years hiding in space, running from time as a shipman aboard spec-jaunting merchant frigates. Jump to jump, orbital to orbital. While you spend a relative month ramping up the fusion drives to hit a Gate at the Rifkin threshold, the rest of the universe spends fifty years getting old — that much closer to death. Plus, not so many dead people in empty space, yes?"

Ridimon said, "Yeah, well, I woke up one day and I was tired of running." It was a turning point, the kind that comes once a lifetime, if that — sudden, random, and completely contrary to everything that had gone before.

Phidrik laughed again, a superior laugh. "That's crap, Ridimon, and you know why? Because photomics sends a ship through a Gate at speeds up to the Rifkin threshold, but to go hyper-c the body's gotta be dead. Skelli technology tricks photomics into thinking the human bodies are dead — it hides their souls, then it pushes them through the Gates along with the rest of the ship. But the Skelli are all gone, yes! Your old Imperium stuffed and mounted the entire Skelli race before it ever realized the Skelli created the Gates. Not that the Skelli didn't deserve it, they were a callous lot anyway, nasty, eating passengers and selling ships to Farassi pirates for salvage."

"Shut up about the hyper-c Gates!" Ridimon's patience was nearly gone. "I ramped up to my last Gate before you were even born in this time frame."

"You think so, yes?" Phidrik laughed again and said, "One day the hyper-c Gate will send the ship but it won't send your soul. You know hyper-c technology is in decay, the Gates are crumbling, no one understands how to save them. It's only a matter of time before interstellar travel diminishes. First system nets, then local pockets, then nothing. Soon, soon, especially in relative time, you won't be able to outrun death."

Despite the arrogance in Phidrik there was a touch of sincerity as well. Ridimon said, "Maybe. All that matters now is getting rid of this curse."

Phidrik seemed to weigh options and eventually said, "I don't know how to cure you, but the *kigrin* of Kido probably do, if you are shrewd enough to trick the information out of them. I do not think you're that shrewd, my friend. But I will hunt you a *kigrin* so you can find out."

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Phidrik extended the airfoils, eased the throttle forward, and the airboat accelerated out across the Canopy toward the east. As the muggy air of Kido rushed past, Phidrik took another swig from his bottle and said, "It's a cruel paradox, yes? In seeking the secrets of death, you risk the dying before the knowing."

THE NEXT MORNING Phidrik and Ridimon dropped through the Canopy in the skiff. They took the flex-nets, several mesh harpoons, one deck-mounted pulse rifle, and a processor remote. After nearly an hour on the faint trail Phidrik came to an empty root cavern in a *kidaah* tree. He found a trace spoor and sniffed it, then he felt its texture between his fingers. "Ten-span, female, eaten mostly *phistrii* leaves recently. She's an ornery old hag. And a damn hypocrite because she'd never admit it. I'll teach her, yes."

Kigrin, Phidrik explained as he picked up the trail again, were lazy creatures at heart. They could be sly, and cunning, but mostly their intelligence was spent in finding the pungent sweetness of soft mud, or the tickle of beetles across a relaxed wing. Time was meaningless to them, and linear thought was equally pointless. The Song pulled at the *kigrin*, but it showed them only what they already knew they were: creatures of the moment, content with mist and water and mud. They wanted no more than that, and so the Song could not conquer them.

Another hour passed as Phidrik and Ridimon skimmed mist-covered pools of water that snaked their way in and around *kidaah* trees. Leathery bats flapped away from the drone of the skiff's drive as it threaded the air slips above the pools. Cries of the dead sometimes floated in from the distance, always at the edge of Ridimon's senses. Behind them the Song of Kido slowly built itself louder than the buzz of his translator, then suddenly —

Jump. The frigate plows empty space and loneliness; the only trust is trust in physics, dilantium hulls, oxygen recyclers. The only faith is the promise of the hyper-c Gates, alien technology, atoms and neurons and souls recombined the way they began. Relative space, relative time, relative faith. The frigate orbits a planet, another chance, another choice.

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Absolute world, absolute faith. But no absolute for a relative man. Jump again.

Phidrik grabbed Ridimon's shoulder, and the buzzing stopped. They were in a copse where the *kidaah* trees were dense and strong fen-moss sprang up from spongy ground. Phidrik dangled a charm on a string in front of Ridimon and told him to put it around his neck. The charm was a small tooth with the figure of a *kigrin* etched into it. It was a gift from the celebrant witch of Qidrit, Phidrik said, protection against both the swamp and the Song. Phidrik did a little chant, and Ridimon wondered if he was trying not to crack a smile.

"Know this, Ridimon," Phidrik said when he was done and the smile was gone. "As long as the Song is sour, you can resist it. When the tune becomes sweet, when it becomes what you want, that is when it has you, and you will never escape it."

Ridimon hesitated, but when he put the charm around his neck the Song faded and calmness came over him. The occasional cry of the dead seemed much more distant and less threatening. For the first time since dropping planetside he took a deep breath without feeling suffocated.

Phidrik began to string a flex net between two *kidaah* trees. After watching him work for five days Ridimon thought he had figured out the man's secret: to be a true *kigrin* hunter, to be immune to the Song, Phidrik must have already known who he really was, deep down, and was at peace with that knowledge. Much like a *kigrin*, perhaps. The fact that Phidrik was an impulsive drunk to the core only made Ridimon bitter.

Ridimon helped Phidrik string several more flex nets not far from the first. In the dim, mist-filled air the translucent nets were nearly invisible. Phidrik then scouted back west in the skiff until he found a swarm of bog flies. He circled the skiff around the swarm and said, "This one should work nicely."

From the middle of the swarm rose a faint moan that convulsed into a cry of pain, then subsided into a whimper. Ridimon slowly realized the bog flies were swarming around a human *soul*. Maybe the very soul he had heard wailing the night before.

"Many things feed off the dead," Phidrik stated, anticipating Ridimon's question. "Even the bog flies of Kido."

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Ridimon felt cold despite the mugginess of the swamps.

Phidrik handed the skiff controls to Ridimon, telling him to circle tightly, then he climbed to the prow of the skiff and spoke to the soul in words Ridimon did not quite understand. Phidrik's voice echoed above the buzz of the flies, as if it were truly louder and held more meaning in some other dimension. The soul responded, but not in any molecular sound wave that Ridimon's translator could pick up. To Ridimon it sounded like begging and pleading, and Phidrik answered in more echoing whispers. Slowly the soul followed Phidrik's voice, and Phidrik lured it farther east, not far from the flex nets. When he stopped speaking the soul cried out in despair and seemed to lose momentum — or perhaps desire. Phidrik took back the controls and hid the skiff behind *phistrii* growth a good hundred paces off.

Phidrik fired up the neural processor remote and monitored the spectrum reports relayed from the sensors to the airboat and back down to the skiff. "Human souls," he said, "only hear what they want to hear. You must listen to what they're saying, find what they want. An explanation, maybe, or a second chance, or revenge. This one merely wanted to say good-bye to its wife. I told it she was over here."

Ridimon felt sorry for the soul, and for all the souls he had encountered over a thousand years. And of this one, who had such a wife to yearn for, he also felt jealous.

Phidrik read the processor remote and said, "Won't be long now."

Ridimon's recklessness seemed to have deserted him, replaced by a heavy feeling of dread. He and Phidrik waited patiently until Phidrik suddenly pointed. Ridimon saw a swell in the water under the bog flies as translucent, vein-laced wings and a serpentine body emerged from beneath the surface. The flies scattered in an angry buzz, and the soul let out a shriek of terror. Then the shriek was muffled as the wings folded around the space containing the soul, and the body splashed back into the water, head first. For a moment the *kigrin* twisted and writhed around, its tail flapping, waves of water and swamp muck radiating out to the *kidaah* trees.

Ridimon realized in horror that the soul was bait, and the *kigrin* was somehow eating the soul. And then his heart sank further: the *kigrin* of Kido themselves weren't attracted to the Song, they were attracted to the *souls* that were attracted to the Song, and they *fed* off of those souls.

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Ridimon felt sick and could barely hang on when Phidrik shot the skiff through the air, hissing while firing the pulse rifle in a rapid staccato. The *kigrin* rose out of the water when it realized it was not alone. Phidrik continued firing, not at it, but around it. Swamp water boiled, *phistrii* leaves sizzled, and the *kigrin* let out a scream that shook the trees. Then the *kigrin* fled, half running, half flying in the direction forced by Phidrik, right through the *kidaah* trees and into the flex nets. The *kigrin*'s neck snapped to the side first, then the rest of the body slammed into the nets.

Phidrik abandoned the pulse rifle and fired several volleys from the mesh harpoon. The mesh strands wrapped around the *kigrin*'s legs and wings and constricted with an audible hiss. The *kigrin* let out another scream, thrashed around, and then realized it was caught. Phidrik brought the skiff to a hover about thirty paces out. He took tension and stress readings from the transmitters on the nets, and remotely adjusted the pressure distribution.

The *kigrin* remained still, staring at the two of them. Phidrik motioned at Ridimon as if shooing him away. Ridimon hopped down from the skiff onto semi-solid ground. His recklessness was gone, and now he was only helpless. A thousand years of struggle had come to a single point in time over which he had little real control. Ridimon put one foot in front of the other, slowly, until he stood ten paces from the *kigrin*. He said, "How can my curse be cured?"

The *kigrin*'s dead, black eyes blinked once. Its head swiveled as if glancing at Phidrik back on the skiff, then swiveled back to Ridimon. Ridimon heard a voice in his mind, though the *kigrin*'s mouth remained still. The voice was Imperium Standard and feminine, but with sibilance much like Phidrik's.

For such information there is a price.

"What is that price?"

You must let me loose.

"How do I know you won't kill me if I let you go?"

You don't, and that is the crux of your problem, yes? Death. Are you willing to gamble your life to cure your affliction?

Ridimon looked back at Phidrik for help, but the Kido native merely sat motionless on the prow of the skiff, watching and waiting. Ridimon

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turned back to the *kigrin* and asked, "What good will a cure be to me if I am dead?"

Perhaps a great deal of good, human. Are you here in front of me now because you are afraid of living among the dead, or because you are afraid of dying *among the dead? Dying the way they have — with regret?*

There was a power surrounding the beast, an aura of wisdom resting latent, but with unimaginable potential. Suddenly Ridimon was afraid not only of dying, but of the horrible truths this *kigrin* might reveal.

What if you are cured so that you never again hear the dead screaming in agony? Are you not still destined to join them? You have outrun death for a thousand years, but you cannot run forever.

Ridimon dropped to his knees, and fear became panic. A millennium of running had been pointless, and a cure to his curse might be only an artificial reprieve from the inevitable.

All the dead souls you have encountered have been miserable and bitter, and sooner or later, human, you will join them. But I will tell you this — you are a fool if you think that all souls exist in pain. No creature is predestined for such a fate. I know what you need to do, human, to avoid it. This secret and more I offer you — if only you will set me free.

A small bit of hope grew in Ridimon for an instant. The cure to his curse suddenly seemed of secondary importance to the greater secrets of death. But he said, "I saw you before, I saw what your kind do. If I free you then you'll kill me and eat my soul."

If I show you what you seek, human, you may beg me to eat your soul.

The *kigrin* would not elaborate, and so Ridimon was left to choose — live on in ignorance, still cursed, still doomed. But live.... Or finally grasp the cure he had sought his entire life, and maybe die today in the maw of the *kigrin*, with no chance to use the knowledge.

Ridimon knelt in the muck of the swamps of Kido. He should not be afraid to die, he had been ready to face this moment from the instant he had decided to stop running. The Gates were dying, and from the sprawling Imperium protectorates to the farthest OutRim seeding colonies he had never found a world to call his own. He might never again have this opportunity. It was only suicide, only death on the razor teeth of a *kigrin*.

Ridimon opened his mouth to accept the bargain, but nothing came out. He strained to speak but his body did not comply. An eternity passed;

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he stood there, frozen, and only in his mind did he eventually hear himself utter, from some place far away, "No, no, no...please...."

But he could not do it.

He barely felt anything when Phidrik pulled him from the muck into the safety of the skiff. From that same faroff place he heard the *kigrin* roar, but then a second roar overpowered the first, and turned into a snarl, then finally a low hiss.

As the skiff broke through the top of the Canopy, Ridimon lay in a daze of confusion and anger and cowardice. That is what he was — a coward — unable to carry through with what he had to do, the very reckless thing that had driven him for all this time. He had failed. He could not knowingly, consciously, give up his life.

Phidrik docked the skiff with the airboat and prodded Ridimon to get up. Ridimon groaned and turned away. Phidrik said, "What, can't live with yourself now? Might as well throw yourself overboard and snap your neck. Except that's exactly what you don't have the guts to do."

Ridimon raised his head, slowly, and saw Phidrik kneeling over the prow of the airboat, offering a hand to help him up the ladder from the skiff. Behind Phidrik, in that vast, empty sky, shone the Kido system sun, silhouetting the Kido native. And surrounding him, hovering around him, was the ghostly image of a *kigrin*, nearly transparent yet unquestionably massive.

Ridimon cried out in confusion and scrambled to the back of the skiff. Phidrik slowly stepped back onto the airboat, and as the sun's positioning behind him changed the ghost image disappeared.

"What the hell was that?" Ridimon shouted.

Phidrik lowered his hand and asked, "What?"

"There was a *kigrin*...on you."

Phidrik sighed and after a long moment of thought he said, "That, Ridimon, was my true form."

"What are you talking about?" Ridimon jumped behind the pulse rifle on the skiff and aimed it at Phidrik's chest.

Phidrik shook his head. "You cannot kill me, Ridimon. *I am already dead.*"

Ridimon sat behind the rifle, stunned. Phidrik's form slowly began to

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melt, then expand. Slick, tattooed skin turned gray and wet, wings sprouted with translucent veins, the neck lengthened, extra arms grew out of the torso and the head became diamond. With the increased weight the front of the airboat sank, and the neural processor strained to maintain level.

Ridimon heard in his mind: *Myself and my kind have been dead for eons. Our physical bodies were as you see now, but before we died we learned the secrets of disguise, illusion that tricked not just the sentient mind, but matter — atoms, quarks, photomic elements. Upon death we could still interact with matter in a way that it didn't know we were only spiritual remnants of animate beings. What photomics doesn't know won't hurt it, yes?*

Ridimon was speechless.

The illusion became permanent. We could take any appearance we desired, but in doing so we could never return to our true form, not even to finally accept the death we had cheated. We're not made of matter, we're no longer of spirit. We're what exists in the emptiness between the two.

Ridimon fingered the trigger on the pulse rifle. He said with disgust, "You *eat* human souls."

Without souls we grow dormant. We need the essence of a soul's photomic pattern to help us maintain cohesion, and with those patterns we retain those souls' memories and knowledge and emotions. We've survived on many types of souls over the past millennia — the hyanin, Quitsit, Skelli, the gh'halanidians. You humans are merely the latest in a long line. Although by far the tastiest, I must say.

"Why are you telling me this? What have you been doing leading me around for the past five days, pretending to be some human?"

I protect the other kigrin. *The humans that consider themselves natives of Kido worship us, and we provide occasional theatrics for them — a successful hunt here and there. But TransCom is a new player in the Kido system. The Imperium's industrial mandate is pressing TransCom to expand its gas mining deeper into the swamps. So I take human form and keep watch. If a human represents a danger to our safety, I do what is necessary to eliminate him.*

Ridimon remembered the innocent tip from the bartender in the

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tavern at Qidrit — try Phidrik, he's local, he speaks the Song, he's got *kigrin* blood in his veins. And all along Ridimon had thought it was Orestie rum. Ridimon said, "Yeah, well, you going to eat me now, too?"

The form of the *kigrin* shimmered and shifted again as the wings and neck and talons all retracted and melted back into the slick, hairless humanoid with the black eyes. He spoke again, this time with a real voice, "I should have killed you the first day out, Ridimon. I knew you were different. But you know why I didn't?" He spread his hands out and frowned. "Pettiness, I suppose. I enjoyed toying with you, I enjoyed the power I had over you, squeezing you for fear. It was a game where only I knew the rules. You see, the human souls in me dominate the others, they try to dominate each other, and I can't always control them. They've tainted me, made me so damn petty. Not to mention selfish."

Ridimon heard the hatred in the voice, even if it almost seemed to be self-hatred. But Ridimon wasn't in any mood for sympathy. He kept the rifle trained on Phidrik and said, "Welcome to humanity."

"You would've died just now if you had accepted the offer. I would've let you, I thought that was what you wanted. But maybe you aren't ready to die just yet."

"Damn straight." Not without knowing what the *kigrin* meant about the fate of souls. Ridimon's cowardice suddenly seemed excusable; he didn't have all the facts, and these creatures didn't play fair, so their game was forfeit.

Phidrik said, "She spoke the truth. You must think more like the absolute man to see it. That means having faith. At least in yourself."

Through a thousand systems Ridimon had passed over a hundred thousand faiths, religious and otherwise, and not one had ever offered him the peace he sought. He didn't have enough faith in faith.

"If you don't make a choice, Ridimon, the Gates will make it for you."

Ridimon wondered if it was already too late, and even if it was not, he doubted he could ever do what Phidrik suggested. That was why his failure in the swamps below was so monumentally devastating. He tried not to despair.

"Don't you understand that I'm trying to help you?" Phidrik stepped to the edge of the airboat, giving Ridimon an easy shot at him, but his voice was now angry and impatient.

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"Yeah, I understand," Ridimon said. *That I'm lucky to be alive and you are bound to kill me.*

"The flex nets made no difference, Ridimon. The *kigrin* down there could have killed you at any time. She wanted to. But she didn't because I told her not to. You see, the other *kigrin* obey my commands. The human souls I've eaten make me more aggressive, faster, smarter. The other *kigrin* are afraid of me, of my humanness. Hell, they were always afraid of me, even before you humans came along. That's why they chose me to mingle with your kind. So you could be dead twenty different ways by now. But you're not, because of me."

Ridimon jumped across the skiff, untethered the mooring lines and pushed the small craft away from the airboat. Phidrik let him. Ridimon climbed back behind the pulse rifle and aimed it at Phidrik's chest. "You looking for a medal, then?"

"Fool," Phidrik said, and he took the flask of Orestie rum from his belt. He drained half of it in one long gulp. Streams of the alcohol ran down his chin. He held up the flask and said bitterly, "Illusion. I can't touch matter. You know what it's like to be an alcoholic who can't ever again taste a drop of Orestie rum? A father with no children? A painter with no canvas? A dreamer with no dreams?"

Phidrik took another gulp from the flask and wiped his face with his sleeve. He hurled the flask toward the skiff and Ridimon heard in his mind: *You will, Ridimon. You will.*

Phidrik smiled his leering smile, and Ridimon let loose with the pulse rifle. Energy bolts shot out and passed right through Phidrik's body as if it wasn't there. The bolts hit the cabin of the airboat behind him, setting off a string of explosions. Bits of metal flew, and a concussion of hot air rocked back over Ridimon.

Phidrik's form shifted, expanding and melting into the wings and neck and tail of the *kigrin*. The wings flapped and the *kigrin* took flight, sending the airboat spinning in the opposite direction. Ridimon streaked away in the skiff, yet he still heard Phidrik in his mind: *I'd die to travel the stars and live a human life, but I can't, I'm already dead and bound to protect a planet full of lazy, slothful creatures. I've got only stolen memories, and you, you bastard, you can truly live, and you choose not to.*

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Ridimon dove right through the Canopy, not waiting to find an opening. Branches snapped off the pulse rifle from its turret, smashed the windshield, and nearly ripped Ridimon out of his seat, but then he broke through into open space in the swamps underneath. He flew at full speed, not caring about direction.

Phidrik's voice followed in Ridimon's mind, fleeting and still bitter: *Beware the Song, Ridimon. Kigrin are older than humans, but the Song is far older than kigrin. If you run I can't protect you.*

RIDIMON WANDERED, searching for the right path back to Qidrit. He was a lonely, artificial intruder gliding not through a forest of *kidaah* trees, but through a forest of souls. The dead around him wailed and moaned, their collective cries telling him he was doomed. All he had to do was stop and they would drag his soul down into the muck of the swamps where the souls of cowards truly belonged.

He thought Qidrit should be due west. He sometimes risked a moment above the Canopy to take crude altitude readings of the Kido sun, trying to plot a hopeless path. Once he dared to turn on the processor remote to try and locate Phidrik, but when he saw Phidrik's human face looking at him through the lens of a vid sensor he hurled the remote into the swamp.

When Ridimon's thirst became unbearable he drained a small stream of the pure water from the skiff's ion tank. When the tank ran dry he added swamp water, and when the propulsion nozzles clogged with swamp muck he spent precious time trying to clean and flush the system. The ion levels in the tank slowly fell, and with them, Ridimon's hopes.

At night he anchored the skiff just under the top of the Canopy and tied himself to the broken turret so he would not climb out under the control of the Song. The charm no longer seemed to protect him, and the Song returned, louder now, beating on him from all sides.

A broken spiderweb in the top of the Canopy, glistening in the starlight. The spider on a single strand, hanging in the breeze, waiting. An old man uses clawed hands to tie strands, talons clack together, faint, meticulous work. The web grows, circular, in the center is a hole, through

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the hole runs a river of rum. The old man steps through the center, a small kigrin *emerges on the other side, it flaps away, the spider tries to follow, strand to strand, the center always moves, it can't be reached. The rum spills through and turns to blood.*

Ridimon fretted in delirium between bouts of the Song. He was running again because he had failed to cure his curse, or to find the secrets of death. Now evil things lurked in the swamps with him, and he constantly ducked in fear of the flap of wings and the snap of jaws. He thought of Phidrik and the hunger in those dead eyes when Phidrik had talked of human souls. And Ridimon knew that Phidrik had developed a taste for them — a human taste.

Hyper-c ships in orbit like bog-flies, shuttles to the surface like metallic rain. Red uniforms, Imperium troops dripping off surface transports, collecting, rivulets of soul flowing into the swamps. Kigrin *engorged, devouring, bloated. Wings unfold and envelop all of the swamps, Kido, the Gate. Through the Gate, pouring, more souls. Watching, a face buried in hands, the hands are claws.*

Ridimon let the skiff float back up through the Canopy. He lay on the floor and did not care anymore about hiding from Phidrik. All he could see was the vast, open sky; he tried to let his soul float up into it and disperse. He did not notice when the skiff drifted between the massive support struts that raised the mining town of Qidrit above the Canopy. Nor did he care when a TransCom airboat wove its way between the struts to retrieve him from death.

—

Ridimon awoke in a bed in a small, dark room. Several drip lines ran from an ancient utility-med into his right arm, and for a moment he was back in the war, being prepped for the next wreckage sweep. But the room was lined in Kido wood paneling and primitive Kido lamps and chairs — it was not a scientific laboratory. He tried to rise but his arms and legs were tied down.

Time passed, and Ridimon did not worry where he was. He only cared that he was no longer in the swamps, at the mercy of the Song, or in the

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shadow of Phidrik's wings. After a while the door opened and a man came in. He introduced himself as the Director of Operations for TransCom mining and explained that Ridimon had been in Qidrit for four days, recovering from fever and delirium brought on by "swamp sickness." The Director asked where he was from, what he was doing on Kido, and what had happened on the hunt. Ridimon decided not to say anything but found himself answering anyway. Then he realized he was drugged, and he could not tell a lie, or even a shade of the truth. A surge of panic spread through him.

The Director was a human of indeterminate stock, though definitely not a native of Kido. His questions were concise and his tone was uncompromising. There was an arrogance in his demeanor, the same arrogance Ridimon had found in the gen-lab technicians and the Gate-hopping frigate captains and even in the alien creature that called himself Phidrik; somehow it seemed to transcend genetics and span a galaxy.

The Director probed details about Phidrik, asking what the guide had said over the course of the hunt and exactly how he had said it. The questions went on for almost an hour, then the Director abruptly left. Later a Kido med-tech came in, but he said nothing as he hooked Ridimon to a download port on the utility-med's console. Ridimon tried to pull away but the restraints wouldn't let him, and in an instant he knew all of his neural translator records had been transcoded into the local frame.

Some time later the Director returned, and this time the questions were more hypothetical:

"Do you believe this Phidrik really eats souls?"

Yes. I saw it happen.

"Do you think he has eaten Skelli souls in the past?"

Yes.

"And so he retains the knowledge of the Skelli?"

The knowledge of those Skelli souls he ate. Yes.

"Knowledge of how the hyper-c Gates operate?"

Maybe.

"Knowledge of how the hyper-c Gates could be repaired?"

Possibly.

The Director left but the implications of his questions lingered behind Ridimon's mental fog: the possible key to the restoration of

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galactic hyper-c travel lay in the dead soul of an alien deep in the swamps of Kido. And yet, as monumental as that idea was, Ridimon didn't really care. Hyper-c was precious little good to someone who couldn't even sit up. After concocting a thousand impossible methods of escape, Ridimon wondered what he would do with freedom anyway. The *kigrin* had said not all souls were doomed to misery, yet why had he never found such a soul? Where were they? Phidrik had talked of faith, and faith was a thing foreign to Ridimon, who lived by the metal hull of a frigate and the predictability of death. But if there was ever a time when Ridimon felt a little bit closer to having a faith, in a god, in himself, or anything else, it was then. Perhaps there was hope yet, for life, for a man named Jax Ridimon.

The next morning the door opened. Two men in TransCom uniforms came through, untied him, and carried him out. He tried to struggle but did not have the strength. The two men hauled him a long distance and eventually bent him face-first over the railing at the very edge of the Qidrit mining platform. A hundred feet below him the support struts of the city disappeared into the Canopy, and a thousand feet below that they met the surface of the swamps.

Ridimon felt cold metal pressed to the base of his skull and he knew it was the barrel of a pistol. Suddenly saliva welled in his mouth, and bile rose his gorge. He tried to cry out, "No, wait, please, *please* — "

A searing pain flashed through his head, but only for an instant, then a cascade of light filled his mind. Somehow he could still feel terror as hands lifted him up over the railing and threw him out into the open air beyond. As he fell he tried to scream, but no sound came out.

Ridimon awoke, groggy, floating. He wondered how he had survived the fall and the pistol. Trying to look around, Ridimon had trouble focusing: he was aware of *kidaah* trees looming over him and shafts of sunlight piercing his body, and there was a distant buzzing in his ears that wouldn't go away. Behind the buzzing was a pull, whispering to him, compelling him. He was drifting toward it.

Then he was aware of another presence, a *kigrin* circling him, wading through the murky water. The *kigrin* said, *Is it what you expected?*

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Bog flies buzzed around Ridimon, biting at him, swarming, he tried to swat at the noise but he couldn't, his arms did not respond. Then Ridimon realized that he couldn't see his body, he didn't *have* a body, all that he was consisted solely of impression, a feel for what was around him, and behind it all, constantly pulling, the uncounted memories and potential futures of the Song.

His first thought was, "I am dead." And then, "It wasn't supposed to be like this."

Ridimon also found that the dead could still feel anger. A rage welled up inside him, and he wanted to scream in frustration — or bitterness. Wasn't a human who could hear the dead worth keeping alive? Even as a tool or a pawn?

The circling *kigrin* was Phidrik, as somehow Ridimon knew it would be. Phidrik said, *Your knowledge was too dangerous, Ridimon. With your ability you might have been useful to TransCom. But there are Imperium agents in TransCom, and they leave nothing to chance. Not with so much at stake.*

"How do you know that?"

I've eaten TransCom souls.

Ridimon's anger simmered, though for how long he couldn't tell. Time had become meaningless. But eventually the anger detached itself and left him numb. He tried not to think of what he had left behind: all his ambitions, all that he had meant to do, all he had needed to do before that moment. And he tried not to think of the horrors in the Song, the many paths to misery. He pictured instead the *kigrin* in the swamps with him, things immediate, the past irrelevant, the future unimportant.

He wondered if Phidrik was going to eat him, and though he had no vocal cords to make sound, Phidrik understood. The *kigrin* said to him, *If I consume your soul you'll become part of me, I'll become part of you.*

Ridimon struggled to concentrate, to keep his thoughts from floating away. He thought, "What choice do I have?"

Only the Song of Kido. There's no escaping it unless I take your soul myself.

After a moment, or an eternity, Ridimon asked one final time, "What is the Song?" Perhaps death had earned him the truth.

The *kigrin* shrugged, at least that was the impression Ridimon

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received, and somehow Ridimon thought he should be irritated by that, but he wasn't. Phidrik waited, a long time, then said, *When I lived, I feared the Song. I resisted, we all did, and paid the price. But I've been watching souls pass through these swamps all the millennia since, and you know what I think? I think the Song is a door — an ultimate, eternal Gate. I think that this life is a gestation for the next, we're as ignorant about that new world as a baby in the womb. It takes birth through that door to experience the world beyond.*

Destiny, fate, inevitable? Ridimon asked, "My soul, it is meant to get pulled...through this Gate?"

It's not a pull, Ridimon. It's a push.

And Ridimon knew Phidrik was right. The Song was not pulling him in, the world was pushing him out: the water, the drops in the water, the atoms in the drops. Trees were bending to push him, sunlight was pushing him, the bugs were swarming and collectively pushing him, everything was pushing him.

It is this world's way of telling you to move on.

"All those souls you have eaten, then — all detoured and ambushed. All denied their fate."

The door and Song, they're one end to a soul's journey. Union with a kigrin is another. Who's to say one is better than the other, or that there's only one proper path for a soul after death?

A line of *kigrin* formed along each side of Ridimon's drifting path. They rose on their hind legs, flapped their wings, and roared in unison, but they let him pass. Phidrik was with him, protecting him. The *kigrin* were angry with Phidrik, defiant.

I'm offering you eternity in this world, Ridimon, if you join me. Guaranteed existence as part of a larger whole. Or, you can follow the Song. The choice is yours. It's a choice few ever receive.

Ridimon had trouble focusing, everything swirled around him. Or was he swirling around everything else? There was another choice to make, he did not want to make it, he had never been able to make choices. He said instead, "I think TransCom knows about you, about *kigrin*. I think the Imperium knows you are the key to hyper-c travel. I think they will come. Waves and waves. I think I told them."

It doesn't matter.

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"The death of hyper-c would be the end. Of humans. Of souls. Of you."

Maybe.

"You want them to come."

Yes. For our own survival. And more. Thanks to your species I have created life and destroyed worlds, trusted and betrayed and been betrayed. I've sacrificed my life for my own brother, sacrificed my life to save my brother's murderer. I've murdered my brother. I've murdered myself.... Such twisted passions, so endless, so enthralling, especially to kigrin *— we've been cold at heart for so long. Now I think some of us are more human than* kigrin.

"You could travel through the Gates. Easy, like a human."

Yes. What humans don't have, they want, and what humans do have, they want more of. But here's another human weakness for you: duty.

Ridimon's impression of the swamps changed, green became red, water blood, *kigrin* rose, bloated on a river of souls. He closed his mind, somehow, and when he reached out again the swamp was green and murky and sleeping. The *kigrin* still lined his path, hissing, they were thin, they wanted to eat him, but Phidrik was near.

"The other souls to come. No choice for them?"

No.

"Why give it, then, to me?"

Maybe...maybe friendship is another human trait I'm struggling to figure out. Or, if not friendship, then at least compassion. Or simple whim.

Ridimon felt that he would smile if he had a mouth, and a body. The idea was almost comforting for a while, until eventually it faded, and Ridimon said, "All the other souls I met. All wandering. Resisting the push. Fighting."

Souls at peace with themselves go the way of the Song, and that is why you could not find them in your travels. The souls that are left resist the Song, or are too far away from it. Though there are many other doors, many other Songs, many souls look in the wrong direction, they won't let go. And so they're doomed to wander. A whole galaxy full of them.

"If only — "

There's nothing you can do for them now. Your future lies here.

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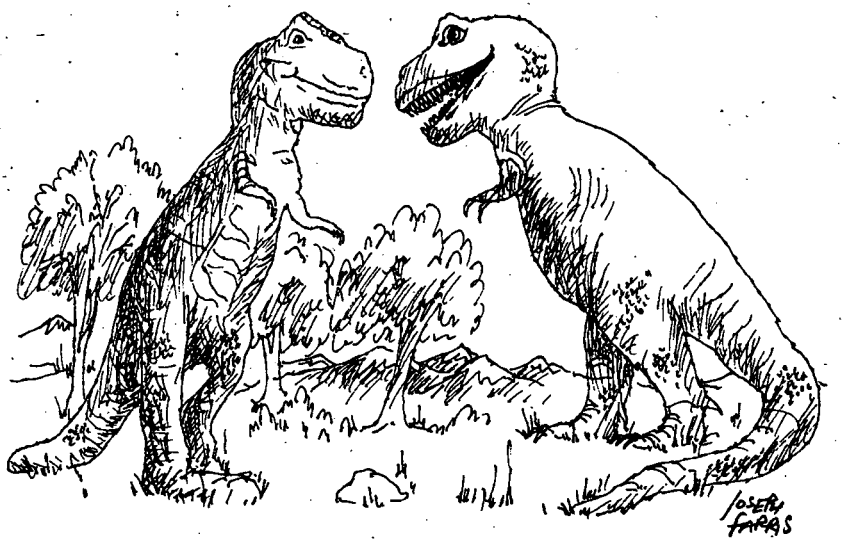
"Death is...not what I expected."

And then Ridimon was done deciding, he let the leaves and the mists and the bog flies push him forward, to the Song, to his future. He did not look back, not even at Phidrik, he had nothing to look back to. He was curious, and afraid.

And for once in his life — in his death — he was hopeful.



"It's a comfort to know our species will dominate forever."

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Here's the reason why Michael Kandel was one of the first people asked to tackle Harlan Ellison's project: he does schlubs *well. Just check out* Captain Jack Zodiac *if you need proof. His many other talents include writing, editing, and translating, but we'll let it suffice as an introduction to this funny story to say that he does* schlubs *well. Many of our early readers said this story was their favorite of the three takes on Lady Luck.*

Poor Guy

By Michael Kandel

—By Gumby.

—By Gumby.

—Father, I have sinned.

—Of course you have, my son.

—But—

—Yes, go on, my son.

—That is not why I am here.

—You are troubled.

—[A troubled silence.]

—Your soul is like the sea that casteth up mire and dirt (Isaiah 57:20).

—[In a whisper.] I have lost my faith.

—Haven't we all, my son, haven't we all.

—Father, when I levitate in the morning, in my cell, during the Seven Supplications to the Sun, I rise no higher than the second drawer of my humble privy locker.

—Ah.

—When I pass through walls now, on the way to mass or mess, I find that I must hold my breath.

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—Loss of focus. It happens to the best of us. Especially when, er, you know, seed is spilled (Genesis 38:9).

—Father, my visions now are...in black and white.

—Merciful Gumby.

—Father, do you know why I came to the monastery in the first place? I was no seeker after the lux everlasting. I was an undercover hack for the *Hoboken Tribune*. Those supercilious pieces they do on UFOs and religion?

—[Sotto voce.] We do seem to get an awful lot of reporters here.

—I was paid to write a feature on the "freak show" (forgive me) at the Mount of Miracles. The inner-sanctum annual casting-out-of-demons ritual. I took pictures, a camera tucked in my cowl; I recorded, a mike concealed in my cassock. I came for the money, strictly. You understand?

—Money is a prime mover. The root (1 Timothy 6:10).

—I'm thinking of going back to the States. Getting, I don't know, a law degree. Drinking again. Having congress again. Maybe going to the races.

—You accomplished so much here, my son.

—[A sigh.]

—[The sigh is echoed. Monk and abbot regard each other for three beats.]

—I'm a loser, Father. Time to face it. I'm not cut out for the Spiral Path of Tú. I'll buy a house in the suburbs. Watch sitcoms on TV. Laugh with the canned laughter.

—We never know what we're cut out for. Until the very end. Even then we don't know. Our creator alone knows. I could tell you a story.

—I am a bitter disappointment to you, Father.

—Not at all, my son. Gumby loves you. I love you. Truly.

—I despise myself. I am filled with such loathing for myself. I would brain myself with the refectory's brass pestle, except it would mean a millennium tû setback for the pestle.

—The story of Brother Anselm, yes. It is time that you heard it.

—Do not waste any of your saintly breath on the vile likes of me, Father.

—You'll see, at the conclusion, why the story must be kept eternally under wraps. Which is a great pity, for it is instructive. A deeply triste tale, yet also a cheap joke. Like the narrative of any life, I suppose, or like that

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of a great many. Does our creator weep or laugh, watching us from his high seat in the empyrean?

BROTHER ANSELM began as a loser. Oh, you misunderstand me altogether if you think he was a loser in an ordinary way. He was more a loser — far more — than any other creature born to woman, including those untimely ripped. To say that failure was his watchword, emblem, banner, and middle name is to understate. He choked on his own spit. He bit his tongue whenever the food was savory. He tripped on literally nothing. He sprained ankles on less. Garbage thrown from windows always found him. Ditto bird excreta of every known and unknown species. If opportunity knocked, it was a sure bet that Brother Anselm would be in the crapper, in medias. In short, this man was the very incarnation of tù.

He was not Anselm then, at the time I speak of, nor was he one of us, of the Brethren. His name was George.

I withhold his last name till the end of this tale, for pedagogical purposes.

Brother Anselm — George — fell in love. Luck would have it — I mean, his uncannily uncommonly bad luck would have it — that the object of his love, this woman, was an uncannily uncommonly powerful gifter of tü. Good fortune clung to her as faithfully as the lowering cloud of jinx and Jonah followed the every step of Joe Bfstplk.

You never heard of Joe Bfstplk? No matter. Before your time. It was a simpler time.

She was Lily Lu, and of such beauty that the sighs of men escorted her through every room and down every avenue like an endless murmur of an arboreal breeze at eventide. Her skin was coffee cream, her eyes lambent as cut iridium, and her luxuriant hair, as she walked, swayed like a delicious skein of sinfully susurrant silk. But I digress. And am too long in the tooth and too long in this vale now, Gumby knows, for such pulse-quickening envisioning....

She worked as a hostess at The Midas Palace, in a city of casinos owned by taciturn and tattooed aboriginals of Oceania. This mighty neon Babylon of Mammon seemed to have sprung up overnight, yet already it eclipsed Las Vegas tenfold, and its hour of judgment had not yet come (Revelation 18:10).

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She would sit at your table, but of course you had to pay. You would win phenomenally in her presence — a million kronen at a mere three tosses of the dice — then pay the house a million and a quarter for the privilege. No one complained. How could you complain, winning like that and with Lily's smile echoing through the chambers of your dim mind as the roseate flush of dawn glimmers like a ludic zephyr o'er the limpid waters of a Disney lagoon? There is, to put it simply, a sucker born every minute (Job 12:25).

George had come to Midas, like so many, in a last desperate attempt to raise himself out of the foul and sucking fen of penury. He had hocked everything and now held the rials in his two trembling hands. He needed to pay a sea of late fees and fines imposed by an unforgiving IRS; he needed to pay alimony in great arrears to three avaricious and implacable exes; he needed to pay for an operation that would remove the hideous plantar wart from the tip of his nose as well as for an operation that would remove the suppurating blastoma from the tip of his, forgive the expression, procreative member.

Seeing Lily — she was gracefully (as always) poised by the roulette wheel among an oil CEO, a mercenary general, and a Texarkana televangelist, each slicker and more venal than the next — George fell at her feet. From an access of love and smitten also by a sudden spasm in his left calf (from a chronically spiking potassium ion deficiency). The rials went everywhere, clattering and spinning as they clattered, every one, into unreachable nooks and crevices. The CEO, general, and televangelist laughed, but Lily took pity: George was so vulnerable and obviously in want of mothering.

She gave him a moue of sympathy.

You might think that his wretched tide was turning, at this sort of epiphanic crux. A moue from Lily Lu, after all, signified, for most mortals, a decided filling of the sails of circumstance. You might conclude that her tü would trump his tù, and love would conquer all. Alas, nothing could be further from the truth!

Buoyed by this beckoning gesture of happiness, George took hope. As he was being given an unceremonious heave-ho from the Midas (since now bereft of coinage) and as he arced through the strobing air toward a fetid ditch, he determined to take his fate into his hands and tackle the

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problem of his existential curse. Little knowing the awful path on which this seemingly constructive step would place him.

First, he tried positive thinking. That bombed totally.

Second, he joined a support group, then went to licensed group-therapy sessions for the hapless. That didn't work either, though it was of benefit to the others, for they saw, seeing George, that things were not half as bad as they might be.

Third, he self-medicated — with nasty medical consequences, as you might expect.

Fourth, he dabbled in tantric trances, which led him, through various New Age sects and fringes, to the Open Hand, the Society of Noumenon, and finally to the Brethren, where he learned about the Cycle of Lives and the Cycle of Tû. He visited a tûradiology lab in Pasadena and had corsal and lypnian readings taken. The needle went off the chart, the hypopsychokarmometer cracked, which was a first in the history of the Alabaster Kumquat Center. A full chi scoping was done. The technician shook his head and tried to smile, unsuccessfully, as he told George the bad news.

In Ancient Egypt, as a purveyor, George had cynically and sycophantically supplied the reigning pharaoh with chariots, thereby making possible the pursuit of the children of Israel, which in turn led to the Lord's intervention at the Red Sea, the limitations of Mount Sinai, the misbehavior of King David, the ache of the Diaspora, and the sentimentality of Steven Spielberg.

On a leaf in pre-Columbian Chile, as a katydid, George had roughly elbowed aside an aphid, which led by a clear and uncontestable chain of cause and effect to the cup of hemlock that killed Socrates, the earthquake of Lisbon, and the reelection of Richard Milhaus Nixon.

In Ghent, as a brick, George allowed himself to be hurled, during a civil disturbance, at a stained-glass window. The brick unfortunately missed the window and instead brained young Felton de Guyter, the greatest artist of the Renaissance — that is, he would have been, had that most precious golden bowl of his skull (Ecclesiastes 12:6) not been broken.

In a field on an island in the Timor Sea, as a donkey, George committed an unspeakable act on a blind horse, which led, incredibly yet verily, to the *Enola Gay*.

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In Trondheim, as a guard dog, George looked the other way, allowing the theft of hush-hush electronics that, in renegade hands, retrochronally led to the sinking of Atlantis, the dieout of the dinosaurs, and — earlier and with ever-increasing momentum — the destruction of Calyx, hands down the loveliest planet in the Solar System, leaving an unsightly and unsafe swath of rubble between the paths of what are now Mars and Jupiter.

In Ilium, as a woman, George plunged two nations into a long and costly war (forget the Nicean barks of yore) by shamelessly leaving her husband to run off with a man half her age.

And so on.

"So what am I supposed to do?" George asked, a chill in his gut.

"You have to pay it back," answered the tûradiologist. "Like everyone else."

"How do I do that?"

The technician's mouth made a sour twist. "The usual way."

"By taking my lumps," said George.

"That's right."

So George became one of us, arrived at the Mount of Miracles, removed his shoes, was shorn, and did the hairshirt thing. Along with the others, he struck his forehead sixty-four times a day on the cold cobbles by the Well of Woe, chanting the extremely tedious Litany of Loss and Lack. He was an inspiration to us all. His tú increased.

If only Lily Lu, in a moment of idle curiosity between customers, hadn't looked him up on Google.

You might ask what a lowly monk would be doing on Google and how he could be found anyway if his name had been changed. But Google is everywhere now, and has resources that even its creators do not suspect. I could tell you a story, but that would be another story.

She came and plucked him from the Spiral Path as one plucks a sloe from a roadside bush or as one plucks out an eye (Matthew 5:29). The Brethren could do naught, stunned by her insouciant beauty and canopious panoply of tü. The abbot himself, Brother Junco, was so smitten by the vision of her that he left the order and became yet another absinthe-swilling puppet performance artist in the underbelly of London.

George — Brother Anselm — found himself plunged into a bath of

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sheer, unmitigated bliss. He was a multimillionaire overnight. His leprosy cleared up. Ditto his buboes, hammertoes, and other infirmities too embarrassing to mention. His teeth whitened without a whitener. He became fit, buff, leonine. Back in the States, married to Lily, he discovered a cure for ADD and ALS, put the Ozarks back on its feet economically, definitively solved the traffic problem in downtown Boston, appeared on *Oprah*, won a gold medal in the Olympics, and was elected mayor, governor, senator, president, all in a blink.

You see the problem: his multigenerational debt of tû unpaid.

He saw the problem too, left Washington, and went back to sackcloth and ashes (Esther 4:1). But to no avail: Lily Lu's love made him prosper in all things, like Brewster and the millions except raised to a power of ten.

If he fasted, for example, his tú made him pulse in the dark like a star, and pilgrims came to worship and reporters flocked from every corner to record the halo phenomenon digitally. It was said that frankincense and myrrh filled the air about him (Matthew 2:11). Many swore they heard seraphic hosannahs chanted above him.

Or, if he took on City Hall and spoke out against entrenched injustice, such as health insurance and hospital billing — surely an impossible tilting at windmills that had to end in his humiliation — lo, the despised practice was overturned as if by magic, and reform flowed as a mighty stream (Amos 5:24).

If he cared for the disgustingly terminal, behold, they were healed and even attractive. Mortification provided photo ops to an extent that paled even the luster of Mother Teresa.

Realizing at last that his great tú was really his great tù, because of his great tû and Lily's great tü, he decided, in despair, to end it all.

Sobbing, he hanged himself, using the strap of an old douche bag. News of his death precipitated Kurdish independence, peace in the Middle East, and the world's resolve to rely no longer on fossil fuels.

He was canonized instantly. Apotheosized. Deified. And that is why we at the Mount of Miracles all wear this ugly gray rubber device around our neck. It is to honor and commemorate our latter-day deliverer.

Yes, perhaps now you have guessed: Brother Anselm was none other than — blessed be his name — George Gumby.

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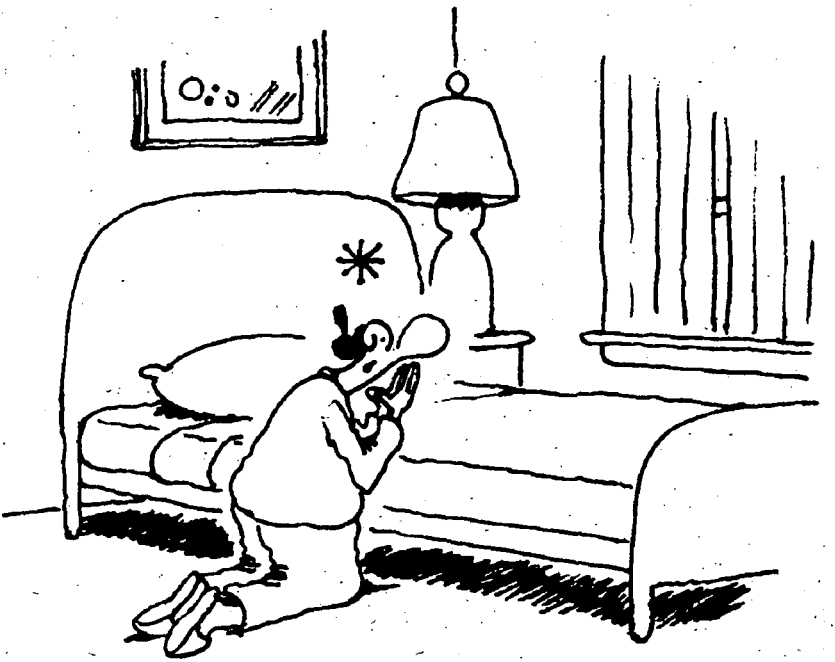
Thus were success and failure in life joined in extreme and unholy union.

I shudder to think, some sleepless nights, what life role has been assigned to our most wretched Brother Anselm. Is he a tapeworm now? A maggot? A truculent ball of snot in the trunk of a bilious bull elephant? Or worse?

Lily Lu, you ask?

After the funeral, she dropped out of sight and was never heard from again. My own theory is that she returned to the place that is her true home, not the casino but the plane of sulfur and tooth gnashing (Luke 13:28), the pit of pandemonium, the sink of Sheol, the toils of Tophet (2 Kings 23:10) — because surely, for all her beauty, she was none other than the Crooked and Cloven One. ☙



"And please give me the strength to accept the asterisk and the wisdom to understand what it connotes."

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Julie Phillips has spent the last decade working on a biography of Alice B. Sheldon (a.k.a. James Tiptree Jr.) and we will be running a review of it next month. However, your intrepid editor—who had the good fortune to work on the biography—sought out a section of the book to run here in F&SF. *The quest proved fruitless until Julie Phillips suggested running a selection of Tip's letters...and that notion led to the following selection. Our deepest thanks go to Ursula Le Guin for letting us publish this remarkable correspondence.*

Dear Starbear: Letters between Ursula K. Le Guin and James Tiptree Jr.

Edited by Julie Phillips

ALTHOUGH, OR BECAUSE, the elusive James Tiptree Jr. could never meet other writers face to face, he liked to send his colleagues fan letters. These letters were in a sense a fiction, part of Alice Sheldon's brilliant performance as Tiptree; yet the exchanges often turned into warm friendships. One of the warmest was with Ursula K. Le Guin. The two writers exchanged compliments and made jokes. Tiptree offered to elope with Le Guin; Le Guin flirted back with this attractive older man. They enjoyed each other's literary sophistication. They discussed writing and feminism in an increasingly intimate tone.

Alice Sheldon admired Le Guin enormously — so much so that at first she hardly dared approach her as a friend. What Le Guin called Tiptree's "pedestalizing" of her sometimes put a strain on their correspondence. Later, Tiptree's evasiveness, both as a writer and as a person, became another source of tension. Feminism was a subject they both found difficult to approach — especially since Sheldon, as Tiptree, couldn't talk about her own experience.

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Yet the Tiptree persona gave them a lot of room for warmth and laughter. The knowledge that they each had a faithful reader and a mysterious friend sustained both writers in their work. Le Guin in particular talked about her writing and publishing troubles, while both writers shared their mixed feelings about the science fiction enterprise. They read and reread each other's letters, feeling what Tiptree called the "iridescent living thread" of their connection. And when Sheldon finally chose to "come out" as herself, the first friend she told was Le Guin.

The following letters are excerpts — brief ones — from a long correspondence, one that lasted until Sheldon's death in 1987. (The ellipses are mostly not for privacy but for length.) The exchange began in April 1971, when Sheldon and her alter ego were fifty-five years old and Le Guin was forty-one. Sheldon had just read Le Guin's new novel, The Lathe of Heaven, *and Tiptree wrote to compliment her on it.*

7 Apr 71

Dear Ursula Le Guin,

Your LATHE OF HEAVEN overcame me to such an extent that I wrote you, while roosting on a beach in Yucatan, a 3-page hand-writ effusion which thank god I didn't send. When I came to reread it I was nauseated — it sounded exactly like [the novel's villain,] Doctor Haber.

You know — aggressive admiration, endless citations of beauties (showing I'd read every single word twice), fatal fluency — the whole Haber bag.

All I want to say is thank you very much for writing something so beautiful.

Your LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS bowled me over, but LATHE swept me out to its deep green sea.

Now I'll quit before I start going on about the jellyfish and the piece of white heather in the glass.

Except for this: Please, it would distress me to think I'd wasted your writing time answering this. I'm sure you know that expressing this kind of admiration is its own reward.

Strength to your arm & all good wishes,

James Tiptree Jr.

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15 May 71

Dear Mr. Tiptree,

You categorically forbade me to answer your letter, so you must understand that *this is not an answer.* It is not to express appreciation of your letter, and it doesn't say how tickled I am that you liked the jellyfish. (Very few people seem to share my feeling for jellyfish.) It also doesn't say how much I like your stories.

Yours, insincerely,

Ursula Le Guin

* * *

20 July 71

Dear Ursula Le Guin,

How wicked of you not to not answer my fan letter and now I can't not tell you how piggishly I joyed in CITY OF ILLUSION & revelled in EARTHSEA. Not to mention not going on about the splendid turtles and the enviable French diseases of the soul....

The plain fact of the matter is that I'd buy an old telephone directory if it bore your name on the cover.

Now Madam, it behooves us to pull up our socks and back to our typewriters (especially yours) and no more idle chafferings with fans (especially yours). We will, you know, *keep.*

Yours aye,

James (Tip) Tiptree Jr.

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21 VII 71

Dear James T., — Tip —

Are you *sure* we will keep? I add a little pickling pretty often just to be sure.

I am about to take the bus out to a small somnolent college in the country where four young people and I are pretending to have a Workshop in Writing Science Fiction for three weeks, and in my English string shopping bag (I seem not to have a briefcase) is the latest "Phantasmicom" with "And Shooby Dooby Dooby"* in it, which I am going to read to them. The last thing I had them do, see, was a space ship containing 3 to 8 assorted entities &/or persons, mostly conversing. They enjoyed this but have had some trouble with it (mostly that you can't tell entities from non-entities). So here comes Shooby. My God. Look, children. See: *This* is how it is done!

But *how did you know I needed it?*

This is NOT an answer to your letter. — Please write us some stories this summer, I can't.

Ursula

* * *

c/o Bradley Lodge
Florence, Wisc. 54121
(Temp. address of no significance)

24 Aug 71

Dear Ursula:

Your letter followed me up to the North Woods & cheered me so I out-howled 2 owls — imagine that tale being of some use to somebody...& what a somebody.

Wish you could have heard the owls — the horned ones have their amok time now, no simple whoo-whoos but a wild cold aurora of maniacs yelling & babbling in counterpoint — HAH HAH I'LL EAT THAT

---

* *"Shooby" was later retitled "And So On, and So On" and appears in the Tiptree collection* Her Smoke Rose Up Forever.

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SQUIRREL NO I'LL EAT THAT SQUIRREL HA HA HEE HI OO WA NO I YOU I HO HO Typewriter founders.

David Bunch just sent me his new MODERAN book, a mean treat. I've long felt he was one of the most undersung and ill-known landmarks in sf...not much beam-width compared say to Cordwainer Smith but oh what intensity at the focus, what idiosyncrasy, what a one roaring diamond glimpse [...]

Wonder if you like him too...I'm sure we share one solid admiration, i.e., the phenomenon known as Philip K. Dick. ...As I guess I said at length in that same PHANTASMICOM. Wish I had the brains to do real reviews & understand about writing like J. Russ and all the other people who scare me. & whom I prize.

The owls seem to have got the prose style, for the great Orc's sake do not repeat not answer THIS one.

Yrs aye,
Tip

For over a year, the two writers went on exchanging warm, funny notes and postcards. (Some of Tiptree's are now lost.) The jellyfish of the first letter became a squid, because they hide in clouds of ink, and appeared in the drawings that Le Guin added in the margins. Then in the fall of 1972, Tiptree answered a note with a 5-page letter that made the correspondence turn serious.

15 IX 72

Dear Tip,

Don't worry, I never received your card! That's why I'm not answering it now. What I can't remember is did I *already* nominate "The Milk of Paradise" for a Nebula or did I just *intend* to. I have paved miles on the road to Hell — Well, I can tell next time they print the list up. As for *The Dispossessed*, my edita has left Scribners in a snit, with my MS, and

Lowbacked Snit, ca 1972

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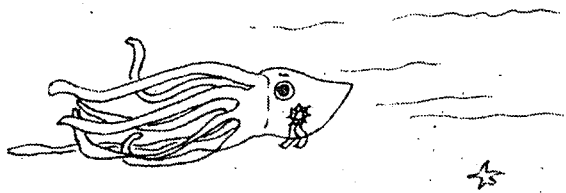
vanished. Isn't that bully? There are times I think everybody in New York is really a vug.

Inordinately,
Ursula

* * *

[3 Oct 1972]



THEY WILL GET YOU YET, TIPTREE

* * *

[14 Nov 1972]

Dear Tip,

I just read "On the Last Afternoon" — may recover in a few weeks — This is the best sf short story I have read in years. Forgive me please I have nominated it for the Neb., don't worry, it won't win, it is *much* too good to win! but nominating might get some people to READ it.

Yours with joyful admiration,
U. Minor

* * *

25 Nov 72

Ursula, dear Starbear —

STOP!!!!

Stop! People are getting very fed up with Tiptree dancing around the

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PO and making indecent proposals to the Money Orders Here lady.

I mean, I got your card.

Dear lady, it is snugly holiday here, a time when Robert Mills [Tiptree's agent] trustingly thinks I am hard at work on a cheesy novel I'm learning how not to write. So let us sit and Uncle Tip will tell you what is causing all this. Something I've learned, in my few gay decades since they built Machu Picchu. Something I think about with enjoyment.

Starbear, you suffer and will all your life from an aristocratic disease of the soul. Not French; international. Look: you know how what is repulsively called creative people are. Artists & writers* & such horses' necks, as D. Parker said?

There they go, with their big invisible radar-rigs overhead, turning & tuning, seeking all the time (in the dentist's chair, picking their noses, fighting with their loved ones, cowering before their enemies, filing by their coffins). *All the time.* Which makes some people correctly conclude that really good writers are inhuman shits. And this rig is pulling in hints, visions, unsung songs, marvels, apparitions, garbage, angel's grocery lists, junk unending quite unperceived by others, but essential to the writer. His nest-building material, his making-a-charm-against-death supplies, I don't know. *You* know; whatever.

But it isn't only bringing in, this antenna. The bloody rig is energised. It's active, it digests, projects. What the owner gets, coming down the wave-guide, is not raw stuff, but a mix. Sea-gulls' jabber comes in as a conversation about Hegel, supermarket shelves come in as a bleacher full of aliens betting on how fast Atlantis will sink. You know; sermons from the silence of stones and books in EVERY THING.

So what happens when the writer reads other writers' work?

[...] Well, writers are almost always paranoid and often surprisingly generous, by fits and starts. [...] So this paranoid sensitivity happens to focus on some writing in which are words, images, an effect, something, maybe only a crumb of peanutbutter — which is *on* the reader's current personal waveband. The words hit the tuned field and flash! Transmogrification! All alarms ring! And down the spout comes pouring — not what

*Maybe it was "poets & painters"... The next line went, "start off with anything, end up at sex."

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the fellow wrote, but a combined product with auras dancing around it!

A product which might be loosely labelled, Oh Jesus, Oh Dammit-to-hell, how — what — This is, this is WHAT I ALMOST WAS GOING TO SORT OF WRITE!!!

Over-valuation is I believe the jargon.

(You see what I'm driving at — but not quite; wait.)

Gripped by this emotion, the writer paces 'round the alarming work, chewing bile, snorting, pouring various critical potions on it to see if it'll fade. Often it does. If it doesn't, depending on his personality, he will then, (a) write an admiring letter. (b) Write a nasty review to everybody he knows. (c) Feel happy that the world contains other good writers. (d) Say nothing for fifteen years and then silently poison the man's dog. (e) Say nothing for twenty years and cry uncontrollably at the man's funeral. (f) All of these.

Now the funny part of it is, that while our writer's judgement may in fact be very good, and he may have actually discovered an unsung star and so on, in a percentage of these cases he has seen in the other man's work qualities which no other eye will ever uncover. [...]

There're a zillion examples of this in writers' letters and diaries — so many that poor smush-brained Uncle Tip can't fumble one out. But I know two lovely ones among painters.

Blake. Wm. Blake had this happen to him with the drawings of a hack named Fuseli. Among Blake's oddments are fervent quatrains boosting the greatness of Fuseli. What he saw in him we will never know; [Fuseli's works] are the sort of thing that used to be seen in dentists' waiting rooms. [...]

Even odder was Rousseau. In his diary you will come across references to a painter named, if I recall, Bouguereau. Rousseau was less generous than Blake. Having been smitten, he gritted his teeth and set out to outdo Bouguereau, to DEMOLISH him, competitively. He remarks triumphantly about his big canvas of the nude on the sofa in the jungle with the lion (that sounds like Flip Wilson) that with *this* he felt he had finally finished B. Now Bouguereau was an absurd salon painter who ran heavily to red velvet, pearly buttocks and portraits of nonentities got up as Phoebus Apollo. What resemblance Rousseau saw between his work and B's will never be grasped, even the brushwork is totally

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different. Bouguereau, at the time, won prizes; his works have long been considered suitable for roofing chicken coops. Praise be that Rousseau resolved to out-Bouguereau himself, but how that came down the pipe is a baffler.

Now, lady dear, I'm not going to claim that I'm playing Fuseli to your Blake, but I do take your words more as testimony that your spook-ears are in good working shape than as a reflection of mine. Much as I dote upon my own works, any balanced judgement has to say that the author of LATHE...oh, hell, I don't need to finish that one.

...Listen, may I ramble on a minute about learning from other authors? [...] I'm just learning about writing, you know. [...] But I have found that there's a difference between the tricks or techniques a writer has and his basic — well, call it the sweep, the substance of his thing. I never find myself envying a good writer his *substance*, the basic life of his story. But I do envy his tricks, I itch to steal them.

Like in Sturgeon, his trick in the opening paragraph of lighting one single spotlight in which an attention-grabbing gesture hits your mind; you're hooked. And his trick — I know it's a trick because he has a few "dead" stories falsely animated with it — of implying banked-up emotion. Fantastic.

And Malzberg (I've *really* liked him for a long-time) — I still can't figure out how he does that repeated-starts, alternate-viewpoints stuff; sort of like Cronkite with the DTs.

And Dick. That business of plonking you down in some incredibly complex, totally gaga and insanely believable Ur-world in which the hero proceeds to wander about grumbling over his underwear, while stuff that would make ten short stories for me flashes by, and hero goes on looking for his zipper while cosmic tortures are loaded on him, he tenderly carries Kleenex to berserk devil-women...How much of that is stealable trick I wish I knew. My hunch is, not much...How he gets that effect of churning you 'round & 'round in radioactive granola while furies feed you candied Confucius...I Do. Not. Know. Oh, that Dick. [...]

Ursula K. Le Guin doesn't show many tricks. There's not much loose skin over the nerves of the story. It's very crystalline, very all-one-alive-thing. Nothing I can filch. I'd have to *be* U.K. Le Guin to do any of it. But

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we certainly do like to make the same kind of story, or write about the same sort of thing. And not write about the same things. I don't know how you'd describe it: Psycho-biological fun and games, maybe...Fun? Ha Ha. Scream.

But even your most physical stuff, that horrendous trek over the ice-cap in LEFT HAND was a psychological journey.

And we're both xenophiles.

What all that means is that your stories come down my radar with auroras flaming around them, I can hardly bear it when one is over.

Also, sometimes I can hardly bear it when one starts. If your furry ears burned some years back, it was Tiptree reading your Clone story ["Nine Lives"]. And tearing up a draft manuscript. Goddam it, lady, that was a terrible thing to do to a poor writer earnestly poking around with a little idea he hoped might be original. About the sanest thing I did that night was pour Drano in my typewriter. Did it the world of good, too.

...What in god's name happened to LATHE's world on the 4th of April?

— *Don't tell me.* (You won't. I can trust you.) But *what*?

...Oooookay, Bob.

Down with fancy endings!

Yrs aye,

Tip

Le Guin didn't answer right away, although she sent a tape of Christmas carols that her children had made. Then in January 1973 she cautiously wrote back.

8 I 73

Dear Tip,

You know, when you said STOP!!! like that you really scared me. I have been rereading your letter at intervals of a few days ever since it came about five weeks ago (and reading selected bits, like the Anatomy of Philip K. Dick, aloud to selected auditors), but I have never dared answer it, because you really did mean stop, didn't you. Except for the tape, & I hope you will forgive that, one has these fits of Christmas Madness, deck the halls with boughs of holly 'tis the season for some folly — They are not so funny to the auditor as they are to the convulsed Creators, I discovered

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that listening to what I thought was a masterpiece we had sent my mother, but the performance of Jingle Bells did seem worth recording, & then one thing led to another, and I can tell from your stories that you have a charitable soul....

Well now you are perfectly right about artistic radar, and about Fuseli, & undoubtedly about Bouguereau who was a new one to me but I can just see the pearly buttocks, and a' that and a' that, yes, you are absolutely right, but there is something else involved, & I don't know what it is. Why is it that when you (I mean I but it is more comfortable to generalise) read a story by a new writer you didn't know before you think this is pretty good but I HATE this person and loathe him and am jealous and feel morally superior & all the rest of Pandora's box...and you read a new story by another new writer you didn't know before and you think this is pretty good and by gum isn't it lovely to find a new writer you didn't know before and you like?? Why *is* it? All I can dissect out of the puzzle is something about trust. I have got very distrustful lately. So many writers ask so much of you, they want you with all your senses open and your defenses down and your eyes round and saying Go on telling ze stowy daddy, and then they turn and kick you in the belly. Then they go off waving banners that say Violence is Realism and Truth is Obscene and God is On My Side, and stomping with their big shiny boots. You might as well trust a mess of SS officers. Well so then a cuttlefish swims slowly into one's ken, emitting small clouds of ink which say, semi-legibly, in pleasing arabesques, such messages as Is Truth? and Violets are Realpolitik and God is Lying Down on His Side, and it vanishes silently among the kelp and starfish; and one is grateful. One is deeply, truly, heartily grateful. One has found something worthy of trust.

The thing is, I have very good literary taste. I really do. It is the one indubitable talent inscrutable providence saw fit to give me. My whole armor for making my way through life, my one clue to the labyrinth, is a radical certainty concerning the literary merit of what I read.... (It's a real big help believe me) (especially when it comes to darning socks, raising children, flying on airplanes, etc) It is of course my essential tool as a writer (judging my own work), but as its expression is usually more intuitive than discursive I was never quite at home in formal Lit Crit even when I could turn off a term-paper on obscure 16th-century French poets

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with a flick of the wrist, and by now I am altogether out of practise, and all I can say is This is Trash, and This is Good — and those who hear are supposed to bow and withdraw in silence bearing the judgment in their hearts — it is very odd how seldom they *do*, however.

But anyhow if you thought it was magnanimity or anything like that, no no. It is just sheer, selfish pleasure speaking. And if you don't like me to tell you that I like a story of yours, I won't; but you shan't stop me from liking it/them; so there.

You know, another part of it is, I can only say this in a very low mumble so that no one else hears, there are so *very* few sf writers whose work I *do* like. I love sf & writing sf but sometimes I feel horribly lonely — morally lonely, psychically lonely — an outsider born. I just *loathe* so much of the stuff that is generally admired. Not just Heinlein but much less benighted people. Phil Dick I love & admire with an enthusiasm that I realise is partly defensive: when he at last comes into his kingdom & is recognised as a really first-rank 20th-century novelist, then I'll happily draw back and start knocking him where he's sloppy; but till then I'll stand up for everything he does. Oh, the radioactive granola was marvellous! Exactly, exactly. Much the same for D.G. Compton's first three books. And Cordwainer Smith, but he's dead, damn it; and one Zelazny — "He Who Shapes" — and Stanislaw Lem, and — and — Well, don't you see why I was so happy when you came along?

You can't keep on reading Borges and pretending it's science fiction because you feel so lonesome, indefinitely.

Anyhow, I will hold my tongue, I promise, and not say anything that will make the cuttlefish turn pale; but if I just send a very small Clerihew now and then on neutral topics would it be all right? I can't bear not to get *any* enigmatic postcards of the North Woods and Chekhov's House and untravelled portions of British Columbia any more.

I stole the whole clone thing from Gordon Rattray Taylor, lock stock & barrel. It wasn't one *bit* original. Oh Tiptree, never tear up anything!

No I won't tell you what happened in April, I don't like to talk about it. Herman Kahn does, ask him.

I won't even ask about your book.

[heart]
Ursula

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12 Jan 73

Dear Starbear,

Your letter of 8 I 73 just arrived and only by the grace of fate and some minor automotive problems have you been spared from receiving an incoherent telegram proposing immediate elopement to Madagascar.

You are beautiful.

But after sobering up I came to the sad conclusion that there could be certain problems for example with your spouse and children, and it might be that they do not sell Geritol in Madagascar, or oil for my wheelchair, and so on. And that perhaps even if these obstacles could be overcome, I could probably expect at best to receive a ticket saying No. 142, kindly wait turn...But the vision of us strolling forever beneath the giant blossoming urp trees, while ring-tailed lemurs weave around us in orchestration of our discourse of agreement...will remain with me.

By which I mean, dear Lady, that every word of your letter fell into my ears with the silvery plonk of total understanding. Ah, yes, yes, yes to all. (Though I do reserve the suspicion that in my case your literary taste is under some bias from your kind heart.) But it is true, I fear, that you have penetrated at first glance to my dreadful secret; all the huffing and rented SS uniforms were in vain, the fangs are cardboard. Underneath is nothing but an eye and a heart like yours, tattooed with the tell-tale insignia: The Secret League of Softies.

(Yeah, call it "soft"; let us ignore that some dreamers, viewing the less than total triumph of Macho Man, might call it "reason.")

I am of course somewhat more battered than you, and perhaps somewhat tainted with human coarseness; I sometimes enjoy what I do not approve of. (I think you do too, I don't confuse you with something by Swinburne.) But I have more the sweaty soul of a janitor in me, my yells for peace are sometimes a bit on the raucous side. [...] Because — to bash the metaphors around — I come to the sf world rather like an old battered Airedale, one-eyed & droop-eared, whose scarred paws have travelled a lifetime of lava plains. I have seen — as I mentioned in that Jeff Smith interview — some real-life villains. One of the more shattering experiences of my life was the month I interrogated Kesselring's Air Intelligence officer, a Luftwaffe colonel whose lean snipe-jawed face and sunken blue eyes were intolerable facsimiles of my father's Canadian face. A calm,

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sensible, dedicated man whose problems in winning his country's atrocious war were exactly those I had been struggling with in my country's heartfelt crusade. A "good" man, within his fatal limits. At the end — to win my sympathy — he told me of his great anti-Nazi gesture: In1944 at Christmas, when he with his staff were deep under Tempelhof airdrome, with the avalanche of Allied bombs raining down and the end of all in sight —he permitted his staff to sing Heilige Nacht *before* rather than *after* they heiled Hitler....

I never felt so safe in my moral superiority after that. [...]

Anyway, back to the Airedale. You see, it's been a long, long way, starting early. Actually, the first dead men I ever saw had been crucified, not on large imposing beams but on wretched little saplings. And tortured first. (That was what people did to thieves, in what was then the Congo.) I made no great philosophical inferences, only noting that whereas they must have started out looking rather different, they ended looking much alike. But all these little lessons had their effect; coming to the sf world...even to the world of art in general...the wrongs, the evil deeds, the fearfully significant moral issues have sometimes the tendency to appear to me as the squabbles of a cloud of brightly colored butterflies. Airedale lies down, panting, loving it all, is very glad to be there. A brilliant being screams imprecations, whirls down, outraged; Airedale nods, beams. "It's *serious!*" "Oh yes." But I love you...Butterfly flounces off furious.

But I do not take what you say like that. Because it *is* serious. Life *is* all of a piece. Only some kind of threshold changes a little...maybe both ways.

Dear Bear, this is a terrible free-association load to dump on your intuitive understanding, somehow after your letter I feel that our radar-fields are in the kind of agreement that makes grunts and rambles comprehensible. What it mainly sets out to do is to assure you that it would take the major powers of earth to prevent me from continuing to shower [Anonymous] Street with unsolicited communications, tangible and ESP-wise. [...] It is wonderful to feel such friendship. [...]

Now please, re the "stop!" do remember that under the Airedale beats the jellyfish, my adventures have poorly prepared me for miracles. I am happiest peeking admiringly out of my kelp, without thinking of Starbear reading mine.

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The novel died; it's at best a novella thing. I feel some kind of change coming, may not write much for awhile.

The whole thing has gone so much better than I had ever hoped; it has been almost literally a life-saver, this writing. Luckily I don't have to do it to live, although that has its drawbacks too. But I'd like to see if there's some new way I can feel out, even if it takes a bit of time to ripen...Probably result in nothing more than more of the same, but my how I love it.

Speaking of your French poets (I know it's the wrong century, never mind) I was delighted to see [Alexei] Panshin mention Rimbaud, as a sort of sf precursor or ally. Went back & read a bit, goodness, what I recall as so far-out and difficult in my spratling years...seemed as comfy as án old shoe today. Only, of course, he did it *then*...Just picked it up to look; my lord what a salad of beauty and repulsion. Could he have been an alien?

We are perhaps crazy.

A ma semblable, ma soeur, all paws & tentacles waving all good to you & yours

Tip

Four days later, Tiptree wrote Le Guin again, although he didn't mail the letter until the end of January.

16 Jan 73

Dear Extraterrestrial:

You know, a letter like yours takes a lot of simmering down from, bubbles still rising in the Tiptree dough days later. I have the impression that I didn't exactly *answer* it — rather I went off like a mad flautist embroidering some triggered theme. For example, I didn't say that the Jingle Bells was...was...Oh, the hell with well-chosen adjectives, I loved it. Do please thank the team.

And I forgot to mention that odd but inevitable occurrence — never fails — first time one thinks of Fuseli in 20 years, the next day there's a monster review of him. (I hope I did him no wrong...trying hard to summon up visual memories; no, I don't think I did...When you come right down to it, one must whisper traitorously that Blake wasn't all that wonderful, graphically, either. Argument wavers.)

[...] Oh, yeah; about the "Stop," it was mainly blushing ego, but also

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awareness of the dread truth that writing letters takes time and I should hate to be referred to in later years as part of the reason why so few new Le Guin works have appeared. [...]

Cordwainer Smith; ah oui. But did you see the embarrassing introduction he wrote (*To Eleanor Jackson*) in SPACE LORDS? Don't read it, I mean it. Add to things the author ought to have been killed by his friends first...My goodness, I was just checking back; forgot *he* went into Rimbaud, too. Take place at end of queue, Tiptree.

The great thing about senility is that the world is always new.

Next please: Must recheck Compton. And the HE WHO Zelazny, and Lem, that got by me without clicking. As to Rattray Taylor (SEX IN HISTORY?)...he may have furnished the stock, or the lock, of CLONE but I really have no trouble distinguishing between you. A perfect example of the biassed radar. All right, so if he is Ursula Le Guin why don't my back teeth ache when I read him?

And Dick...I know precisely what you mean, he's a mass of flaws that spell out JACKPOT. A sort of total dogged naiveté, the language creaking and jerking so you can't believe it, any ten-year-old would know better — like a magician with muscular dystrophy, you see the pigeons lumping around in his sleeves and the thousand silk scarves all over the floor — my god, can he have the nerve to go *on* with this? — and yet it works. Like you, I shall firmly maintain that that thing hopping around on the floor is positively NOT an escaped rabbit — until it's recognised that he's done something unique & grand & lovely & nutty. Or until somebody comes along & does it better. But I have a hunch the dropped eggs are weirdly *part* of it. Someone once did a story about a genuine telepath who kept trying to be a phoney mindreader.

Just to wind this theme up, I came on the enclosed written after I got one of my first rejection slips, it has no conceivable use but — like the howlingly funny tape that one later wonders about — I thought it might be worth your chuckle as my credentials in the Secret League. Tear up when finished. [Encloses MS of "Please Don't Play with the Time Machine," first drafted in 1950s, rewritten circa 1968.]

And now I am left with the puzzle of Who is Herman Kahn? [...]

All good,
Tip

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3 II 73

Dear Tip, the above [sketch of Fuseli's "The Nightmare"] is the sum total of my impressions of Henry Fuseli. I think I saw the original somewhere or other, the Tate? It really is memorable but as you see visuality is not my strong point. It was the horse that got to me. Also the extremely uncomfortable position of the lady. I am so glad you said that about Blake's own drawings, because that was my private explanation for the fact that he was so crazy about Fuseli (which I didn't know till you told me); you know, he'd found *another* artist who never could quite figure out how the arms and legs are attached to the body...But I was afraid you might be a True Blakean and get cross. [...]

Oh, yes, I had read that intro. to Space Lords — oh yes! There is a lot about ole Cordwainer that is distressing, in fact. One senses the double life. His justification for being an expert in psychological warfare was interesting: He said it was a lot better than the other kind of warfare — things being as they now are. You cannot simply deny this. It is true. And yet, and yet. Somehow a whole moral area is simply left out; the area in which alternatives arise. — But this does not bother me too profoundly in his case, because in his best stories he grinds no axes...And because he was the first sf writer since Zamyatin who achieved (blush, clearing of throat, courageous but slightly over-loud statement of the taboo word) beauty. Up from the dirty sink where they wash brains flies the inexplicable skylark.

The reason why so few new LeGume works have appeared is NOT James Tiptree, my word, I wish it were! no, in fact J.T. may be a good part of the reason any new LeGume works have been *written*, a feeling of almost hermetic isolation has been creeping over me which is not very good for writing sf in, & to know that there is somebody Out There like J.T. is tremendously helpful — No, the reason why, etc., is simply that no new L.G. works have been bought by publishers. All I have had from Virginia Kidd for weeks & weeks are batches of polite rejection slips, all remarking that I write well. If anybody else ever says that I write well I am going to hit them with an 18-pound 1950 Underwood Standard. For Chrissake at my age would I be writing if I didn't write well? Rrrrrghgh. Then of course there was the break-off with Scribner, which is OK except

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that that MS was written in the knowledge that there was an option on it & a sympathetic editor waiting for it: in other words, I took advantage of my liberty, and wrote a perfectly unsalable book. Which is my natural mode of behavior. But now here it is like a great infant megatherium and poor Virginia is supposed to find someone who wants to give it a pleasant home. Hooha. Well, I suppose if nothing else, I can always circulate it in samizdat.

I broke down completely when I got to the thin, bronzed flight-shorts. I *cried.* Elisabeth is out playing cello & Carlie is out riding horses, but when they come back, we are going to have a Reading. Then we are going to elect you by acclamation Supreme Cetacean of the Secret League. I salute Your Squidship! We all hope you had a fine time in Utr Nadr and have come back — well — bronzed.

[heart]
The bear

After some more jokes, Le Guin and Tiptree got serious again in the fall of 1973. They were both trying to come up with a story for Aurora: Beyond Equality, *an anthology edited by Vonda N. McIntyre and Susan Janice Anderson, and were having trouble envisioning a feminist future. Then Tiptree's first explicitly feminist story appeared in the December 1973* Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction.

16 IX [1973]

Dear Tree,

Read "The Women Men Don't See" yesterday. Have 9,000,000 reactions, ranging from Jesus, how did he *know*? to No no you miss the *point* through yes! yes! & also But & also But on the other hand — Oh! I wish you had saved this one for Vonda's anthology! You *must* write her one — You and your "tin women" indeed, hah hah she sneers, if Ruth is tin then I am polyethylene (nice Southern girl's name, isn't it? Polyethylene). Ruth actually thinks like Virginia Woolf did you realise it — there is the same ambiguity as to *which is the alien,* men or women. — My favorite line is " 'Men hate wars too, Ruth,' I say as gently as I can" — Well, well. Profoundly admiring regards from my Animus to your Anima, & tell her to go on writing, please. [...] It just occurs to me that I *know* a Texan

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woman named Ethalene, our Mayor's mother (like Grendel's mother?) — No — no — it's Etha-Lou — damn.

Yours in awe,
Charleswainer Smith

* * *

19 Nov 73

Omigod Omigod Omigod O O O h-h-h xchlk Fffff quake shudder

Dear Bear I have been trying to pretend that story didn't exist, nobody would ever see it, etc. etc. because I am fraid what it looks like to among others [you], when I think of it I get embarrassed on the soles of my feet so they curl up.

Eh, well, now you have...Nine million reactions. And of course you being you, only the polite ones came thru. But Bear, it was sincere, I wanted to write it. But I felt incompetent. (But when has that ever stopped Tiptree?)

The thing was in addition to the whole problem of representing a live woman, I tried the technically hardest thing I've ever done, to filter the story through a bland narrator who never to & thru the end *understands* really what went on & what Ruth was thinking of him. She wasn't paying him much attention, she was absorbed in her project, while he takes everything personal...That's how I hoped to get away with her exposition of her feelings, she was talking distractedly with a tenth of her mind, right? Anyway, I felt I had there a wonderful excuse for anything odd she might say or do. And I felt I had a good grip on a set of the kind of lordly misunderstandings and rationalisations Don would utter. (I have become ever more aware that the male gets *no corrective feedback*, he is never disabused of his idiocies about women as he is with other men, e.g. by being punched up the head.)

So what I think I was striving for was irony in the technical sense [...], that is, what Don is saying has 2 meanings, one what *he* thinks and the other what the true eye (us) thinks. An ingroup joke.

And he has some of the obnoxious and very deep gut reactions I've noticed, as when his whole concern when the aliens come is that Ruth *get*

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behind him. That's a very deep configuration for men. I hoped somebody would snort at his "How can I *help you* if you won't etc."...so he shoots her.

But the whole thing was so bear-walking-on-hind-legs I wished it was in invisible ink. WHY DO I DO THESE THINGS!!!???

[...] Hey, lately I've been corresponding with Joanna Russ. It's a little like corresponding with a conflagration. [...] I of course sympathise wholly with her rage and with women ending their oppression. I have seen terrible oppression of women, fearful cruelty, primitive, unstoppable — it's everywhere. The kind here is not less cruel in essence but at least seldom is physically maiming. However — I am old, Bear; I have seen and been attracted to many liberation movements, my god, the IWW was still being beat up when I was young — and I'm familiar with the rage. Also, I'm familiar with the utopian hopes — Ah, once the oppressed get power all social wrongs will be righted. (Yeah [...] you just get a new set of top dogs, mostly.) But I think women-on-top would be a little different, by and large. Of course I realise it isn't a question of taking over, it's a question of getting out from under and being equal. I was just extrapolating. [...] I worry a bit about Russ, because the talent is so great. Actually, I see her more as a writer (and writers are pretty dubious characters) and a bright person in a dull world (and we all know how THAT works) than as an official Woman. The Woman problem could be over tomorrow and her problems would still be there, 80% anyway. [...] Writers get into movements — Oh, god, the Spanish Civil War — and don't realise that the justice they're fighting for will not bring them very much relief. This sounds cynical. It's not meant that way. I'm for the Lib, I even send money and write letters which is a great strain on my chintzy soul. But entre nous — I have this illusion that I have some kind of cultural kinship to that polar constellation Ukleg, forgive it — entre nous & sub specie aeternitatis, I am one of those that always get accidentally guillotined when the Great Day of liberation comes, because...I guess...I am full of parentheses.

Revolutions can't abide parentheses. [...]

[Besides,] nobody and nothing is going to help what's really wrong with you — which is the fact that you are that obscene joke known as alive and conscious [...].

Well I must go do things, reluctantly, reluctantly abandon the

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iridescent living thread that reaches from here to that unimaginable place, what, [Anonymous] St....and spills light on my grubby desk. May it spill, well, love out the other end.

[...] Oh Bear fortune keep thee & thine

* * *

24 XI 73

[...] Listen, Tree, you keep telling me how OLD you are. When I read your first stories I mean when I first read your stories I had you pegged at about 28. I have since revised that to about 34. Nothing you tell me will change my opinion. Statistics, pah! — Do you realise that I am ten years older than you??

Yes: it was the Irony in "The Women Men Don't See" that for a while confused me — I am grotesquely slow to realise that "I" isn't always "me"! — & no good at doing it, either, too egocentric, I tried very hard in Word for World Is Forest & ended up loathing myself for weeks! — but I finally did climb aboard and begin to see what you were doing, & you did it superbly — it *does* give the ironic distancing, & what's more, Ruth *comes through*, & that's no mean trick since 9/10 of her has to be filtered out en route. It is a Beauty Story & has been firmly in my mind ever since I read it. I didn't repress any impolite reactions, Tree. It's just that the whole thing is so complex: because you *are* hitting on the same theme that Virginia Woolf raised in "Three Guineas," her book that everybody hates, her ugly, unforgivable, graceless book about how it feels to be an alien. You strike to the center of something that I have been wrestling with for years. You energise my angel, & I get another fall for a count of 9. So I ain't too articulate about it. I wish I could be.

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That is my trouble with Joanna too. Parentheses. (Children) (Etc.) But I have no parentheses as far as her *courage* is concerned. It is splendid.

I can't write a story for Vonda either! I try and try and try and yes, that's it, I cannot get TO equality let alone BEYOND it, [...] & here are Vonda & Susan for whom I would write a story in blood even though I never have had enough guts to prick my finger with a sterilised needle even — and no story. Oy weh. Eheu.

[...]My Young Friend, I send you love,

Ursula

In April 1974, Alli Sheldon's second persona, Raccoona Sheldon, sold her first story. Alli Sheldon, depressed by her mother's illness and frustrated by her sense that her Tiptree game had become too serious, began thinking of killing off Tiptree and living on as Raccoona. On April 23, she tried to say this, circumspectly, to Le Guin.

The next day, Tiptree got a letter from Kate Wilhelm of the Nebula Committee, telling him that his short story "Love Is the Plan the Plan Is Death" had won a Nebula. Alli became upset, and Tiptree wrote to Le Guin again. But when Le Guin offered sympathy, Tiptree pushed it aside.

23 Apr 74

[...] Listen, I've been thinking about something for awhile and I want to make a peculiar-sounding statement which maybe you will keep to yourself and maybe also you will drop this page in the fireplace. The point is, if you should hear a rumour that Tiptree has emigrated to Tierra del Fuego or contracted galloping MS or been beheaded on the highways — please I beg you, *believe* it. In public. Believe it in private if and only if a note addressed to you personally & writ by me is delivered to you via my executor, one R.A. Koke. [...] If Koke isn't mixed up in it, please just hang in, no matter how otherwise circumstantial things appear. You will be, as they say, contacted. Sooner or later & possibly peculiarly. All this is a bit of looking-far-ahead, not applicable for years if ever. [...] I just have this crumbs-in-the-underwear feeling [...]

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24 Apr 84 [*sic*]

Oh, Bear, they got me. The sweet dear maniacs. I wish I wasn't such a total fthlud about these things, what can I say...I picked out a letter from Kate Wilhelm to open, it looked safe. Would you believe, half an hour later I was vomiting, before breakfast yet. (Does that really mean, Tiptree, that what you really are is beady-eyed sick with ambition, covetous creep, loaded with pious reaction-formation like a TV dessert with whipped sweetness, a whited sink of ego? What is the blood-guilt chum, what are you dreaming after? Sanctimonious invertebrate, your friends have to sympathise with you for *success*, yet? Why don't you pick up your socks, why can't you be NORMAL?...No good; you're just no good...) Oh, Bear, I don't want sympathy, I just want it to go away. It doesn't FEEL good. It feels like our real life is taking on the characteristics of that mess out there, that fake life. YOU should get Nebulas, YOU should bear up bravely. Not me. [...]

On April 25, Le Guin answered Tiptree's first letter, from April 23.

25 IV 74

Dear Tree,

You frighten me. I know you didn't mean to. Only you do. Look: the trouble is this. There are facts about you I don't know. Don't *want* to know. Oh yes, of course, monkey curiosity, what is it? does it tick? etc. But not anywhere below the monkey level. I "know" a Tree and it keeps its privacy, like most trees, & that is more than its right, that is its *being* and how it is and should be because it is as it is, that is the Tree Way. So that is lovely. Indeed it is one of the lovely things in my life the last couple of years. But: there comes the sudden fact, the fact to be burned in the fireplace — but it has no other facts to attach onto and fit into: and so it is very frightening. It just sits there (ashes or no) and stares at me. And says: Is my friend whom I know and do not know troubled beyond all touch or reassurance? Is he *in* trouble? Is there nothing his friends whom he knows and does not know can do, or say, or be? Nothing that would help? [...]

Last week Phil Dick called from Calif. I have never met him either, we have written a few times. We are both scared to death of each other.

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Each of us is the other's Unconscious, I think. Anyhow he had just had some kind of emergency operation & was half seas over on sedatives, utterly enigmatic about what was actually wrong with him & whether he was out of danger, funnier than Charlie Chaplin, laying his soul bare in great swathes, absolutely overwhelming. Geniuses do tend to be overwhelming, I guess, don't they? Well, so I left the phone (God how I hate the telephone) exhausted, & after worrying about him for 48 hours decided, all right, now with *this* man it would be proper, and consulted the I Ching, which I have never done before except to find out how the less communicative levels of my self were feeling about things. I asked if he was OK, & it gave me two beautiful, strong, Yang readings about the "great man" coming through all happy & successful, though there was a goat who would have to do some butting against a wall, first. I *do* like the I Ching. Once it told me I was a little fox who was about to get her tail wet. Boy, was it right, too! Anyhow that cheered me up a lot, & I wrote Phil right off. Today got back a response, which left the little fox all wet tailed again. Typed, so he can't be absolutely bedridden, so that's good; but very weird & sad. I mean, to me it was. He keeps saying he had some kind of conversion experience — he was in a Catholic hospital — but then veers off and chatters about nothing. Oh hell I don't blame him, I suppose anybody who gets within letter's length of me scents the Voltaire lying in wait. But anyhow it was very depressing. One feels so inadequate when faced with mad geniuses. And then I opened your letter! Now look, I ask you, just one simple question I ask you, what is one middle-aged Portland housewife to do with TWO mad geniuses? — No, I am being funny hah-hah, it's not the same with you. You may be mad as a hatter for all I know, but it is the same kind of mad as me, so as far as I am concerned it is magnificently sane. Only it is frightening! Oh HELL I can't say anything I mean because I don't know what I mean. What I mean is, Tree, if you can reassure me, please do, and if I can reassure you, oh please do tell me how!

Do you know, this is rather a good week after all, despite all contrary evidences. At the beginning of it my friend Eleanor Cameron got the Nat'l Book Award, and at the end of it I think my friend James T. will get the Nebula Award. He better jolly goddam well! They can't be such fools as not to. [...] If I hear that Tiptree got his well-earned bit of Lucite, I

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shall grin like the Cheshire Cat, I shall be all grin, I shall dance little schottisches and reels in the kitchen and sing I THOUGHT there was justice somewhere!

YES of course I got your long letter on slippery purple t-w ribbon, what do you think kept me going for the last 6 weeks? I never envied anybody doing anything exotical before, but your desc. of diving undersea had me daydreaming for a long time. [...]

Love,
Bear with wet tail

* * *

7033565052 MGM TDMI MCLEAN VA 100 04-29 0305P EDT
PROFOUNDLY DISTRESSED CAUSED WORRY DEAREST BEAR NOTHING WHATSOEVER AMISS HERE NOR MAD GENIUS NEITHER MERELY YOUR LOOPY FRIEND TAKING CATNIP NOTIONS LETTER FOLLOWS NOW FORGET WORRIES WRITE STORIES LOVE BUCCALOPOD

* * *

29 Apr 74

O Queen of Air and Scuppernongs (masquerading as a Portland Housewife, Offstage Chorus guffaws):

Dear Ursula, I am torn between my usual retreat into whimsy when upset and coming right out with it — let no one say, "manfully," this is what men don't do — and apologising weepily all over the mat. Because of all — all — the long list of Things I Wouldn't Do, distressing [you] is at the top, is in the unimaginable-offences-against-the-universe class. As you so truly said, I'm not *known* in any reliable human-rounded sense, and as you so kindly said, I did NOT mean to.

May I fall all over my feet explaining?

First, re "knowing" me — of course we do and don't know each other, although I believe with all my heart that what one can know of another through their words, their meant words, is very great. Perhaps central. The things they don't say, for example. But let that pass; I think you share it

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and of course it's only partially true. But it has been my way of "knowing" people even when face-to-face. I listen — usually while talking...I used to joke that if a man talked about his mother for three sentences I could tell whether he was Democrat or Republican. (Now that more is known about psychopolitics this doesn't sound so amazing.) But I have loved letters all my life, I'm an old-fashioned Victorian epistolator, and our communion via the posts has been — watch it, Tiptree — really a joy of my life. To find another spirit who loved the same sort of word-dances, the same way of conveying sincerity by absurdity, oh hell, you know. What we have fun at. Right? A sharing.

(That's one reason I called you a "veteran" — it was so great to find myself relieved of the necessity of laboring along, explaining that I wasn't *really* joking. Or *was*...Maybe "civilised" is what I was groping for? But no, more, Starbear, I know that your "joy" is accompanied also by capacity and experience in well, whatever makes [Beethoven's] Ninth something. Let us leave it at, non-joy.)

But I realise you should "know" more than that. Look. All right. First off, I am RETIRED. My life isn't quite my own because of people-claims, we will not breathe the word, "Mother." But I am not employed by or in any spook-shop or even the Dept. of Fisheries. Yes, for a time I did work for a couple of the Wichel Depts. (Which-shall-be-nameless). But only in a very minor capacity, primarily in World War II. I am not a "cold warrior" and regard John Foster Dulles as one of Lucifer's henchmen sent specially to bugger up our land. I have always been a "knee-jerk liberal." I recall in one of the Wichel shops at the time Joe McCarthy was caponising the government, striding down the corridor announcing that I had just paid my Wisconsin state income tax so I could help vote that Appleton chicken-farmer back to the hen-roosts he came from. (A slur on hens.) On both sides people were diving under desks pretending I was something that had got in with the garbage....Except for the occasional sturdy type who gave me a wink and patted his pocket, meaning, Over my dead body it happens here.

[[That was what I liked about the Wichel world, incidentally; it's not generally known that they are a hot-bed of Spiro's decadent intellectual pinko-commy radiclibs. Aside, that is, from the wretched cadre of old OSS ham cutlets who gave us the Bay of Pigs, and whom all working *intelli-*

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gence people want to get rid of. Intelligence should be intelligence, information, an eye and an ear — *not* assassinations and clandestine warfare, cowboys and criminals. It should be unbiassed by national megalomania and paranoia, and it should serve sanity. [...] If you want to sense Tiptree's general Wichel part, it's just about like those two tales in 10,000 Lyrs*, only everybody wasn't so good-looking. [...]]]

You see, the people I've worked with are largely from the academic world. The atmosphere is that of a rather activist faculty tea. And that's the other side of Tiptree; yes, I have some sort of useless doctorate in the behavioral sciences, but I'm not anybody you ever heard of. [...]

Does that help at all?

Now as to why I think I may disappear. (Starbear, you know, all you have to do is sound hurt and all Tiptree's cover comes unravelled like an avalanche.)

Well, I keep forgetting how young you are, and how gently people play. Age and batting around make one more abrupt, more prone to jokes. I'm simply getting...well, not exactly hemmed in, but maybe over-organised? You see, I had planned on about 5 years of working *in*. Suddenly to be so "in" disconcerts me. I'm a natural outsider. So...well, here comes everything, Bear: I've started writing under a pseudonym. And if I don't start feeling more comfy, I may just disappear and let the pseudonym take over. The only thing is, people of my banged-around generation probably over-do things; if I disappeared it would perhaps sound quite final. You know, B. Traven. So, since I couldn't bear existing sans my lifeline to [Anonymous] St., naturally the pseudonym would start writing fan letters to Ursula K. Le Guin.

You see what kooks you get mixed up with. [...]

What I meant it as was kind of a warm private joke between us, something that would amuse WITHOUT TROUBLING the Bear. A tiny odd bit in this avalanche of the expectable.

I do like to laugh, Starbear, and I am VERY shy. I've had to pretend not to be shy, to develop a "cool" persona, and I hate every minute of it. In our sf world it is wonderful to be able to be as recessive as I please. [...]

---

* "*Mama Come Home*" *and* "*Help,*" *with intelligence settings, in Tiptree's collection* Ten Thousand Light-years from Home.

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A few months later, in September 1974, Tiptree won a Hugo Award for "The Girl Who Was Plugged In." WorldCon was held in Washington, DC, near Tiptree's post office box in McLean, VA, but Le Guin had just received Tiptree's postcard from remote Bella Coola, British Columbia.

14 IX [1974]

Dear Tree, dear Bonsai, dear Sequoia Gigantea or Sempervirens,

How are you? Are you back from Bella Coola and the great, grey-green, greasy forests of the Nethermost Michi-Gan? [Says president Nixon has resigned and been pardoned by Ford.]

You didn't throw up this time, did you? Or only for ten minutes, anyway?

Robin Johnson of Australia called me after the convention to tell me who had won. He said that there were many rumors that Tiptree was there, and that Harlan Ellison was sure of it and knew which person you were but wouldn't tell anybody. I said, Bulldust! I said. I said, I don't think Tiptree is there, and even if he is, I don't think Harlan would know him from my grandmother Phebe. [...]

[Le Guin's eldest daughter left home to study at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.] S.F. is the strangest city in the world. I can see why everybody there is either an artist or commits suicide, but I can't imagine why they take drugs. Who needs drugs in a place like that? It's right outside the universe. You take the normal American gridpattern city and set it down on a series of vertical hills founded on an earthquake fault between an enormous bay and an ocean, and you have something *very* strange; and then you get the fog coming in in twenty-mile-long wisps and the whole thing disappears suddenly and there is nothing at all but the faint sound of the fog dripping off your nose, and foghorns all around, like walruses the size of mountains, giving mating calls. I grew up all my childhood right in sight of San Francisco out the west windows; I suppose it really is there; but when I came to write about it I called it Havnor. [...]

I am depressed about Dispossessed, people keep asking me Why isn't Shevek a woman. I know what they mean and they are perfectly right, only he *isn't* a woman. I mean they might as well ask me why aren't I a man. Listen. If you are ready for a pen name I think I am too, why don't we share one? Something nice & noncommittal, like J.U. Smith, or J.U. Jones, or

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something. And we can both use it and people will say, My, what a breadth of style this person has, sometimes she writes like a man and sometimes he writes like a woman...and sometimes they write like a human being...

Write me, kind human being —

[heart]
Bear

You know I haven't said anything because I don't want you to throw up, but I am TICKLED PINK.

* * *

21 Sep 74

[...]

Ourse d'étoiles:

Just got back and found your letter and card also incredible piles from dear dear souls which I cannot, CANNOT answer right now so please do not let on that I am not writing to you because I am not here, but I had to.

Yes, one of the things was a strange rattling carton which when I opened it this tin rocket fell out and I went up the drapes. This is too much, Bear, I do not see myself as being POPULAR. What has gone wrong? Where is my secret elite appeal? Now nobody I love will read me they will all go off after somebody Really original and upper-think, leaving me to the tender mercies of the fickle mob. I do not give one, uh, belch about the f. m. or being popular with many but it appears that what I thought was a nice little "writer's writer" talent is a big puddle of weak adolescent fudge...and I'm not really recherché or anything good, and clinging to the drapes with my large tarsier eyes misted and the small melon under my belt heaving...yes, I will throw up.

On the other hand maybe now all this is over and we can get back to normal, and maybe your dear friends really feel more comfortable talking to you if you have some of those things too, Tiptree, they can't slum around forever.

On the third hand, NOBODY will talk to you with your head in a basin, so let's brace it up. [...]

So true about SF — I was at Berkeley about the time Eohippus was

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becoming monungulate, and yes that was San Fran to the life. I remember one of my first experiences was encountering a Chinatown dragon parade in the fog and thinking they really hadn't explained America to me.

Good luck to your offshoot in the Conservatory. It must be lonely indeed without the music and practicing noises, very unwise to have an Offshoot who fills the aural environment too. (You should have made her play at increasing distances from the house over the past year.) This is [your] mysterious Normal Mother incarnation and I respect it although being ill-equipped to share it. I am not one of those gents who go all misty seeing a radiant Mother swabbing off a Child, I mean, I appreciate the function profoundly and I realize it must be one of the great warm good-relations of all...but I am more apt to think Another damn good astronomer shot to hell....

I accept your merited rebukes. [...]

Haven't yet read DISPOSSESSED, would you believe it, so I cannot gang up on you for your He's not being Shes or whatever. My view is if you say it's a He it is a He. Yes, as to pen-names, if only I wrote at some reasonable pace we *could* have fun. My immediate impulse is to send you all my great starts that never went anywhere. Do you have GSTNWAs? We could be Bärbaum. But it would be 9/10 [Le Guin] as my production rate is about that of the bird wearing away Mt. Everest. [...]

* * *

25 IX 74

Cher Pincliné, Lieber Baumkulm — say, is the Tip a Top? I never thought of that, I always thought of it as a Slant, until I didn't know what a Slant was in German just now. — Yes, I realise that you are not there. "Disorder and Early Sorrow" is a Th. Mann story — winner of the Ursula Award (a steel eggplant mounted on a bronze Quiche Lorraine).

You, moaning about your low output! Hah! HAH! Ha-ha! I haven't written a word of fiction, I mean, *intentional* fiction, for 6 months. Not a The. Not an A. (I can't, so I courageously decided I wouldn't.)

If you'll write the first page of a story by Bärbaum, though, I'll write the second...

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[...] Listen, I am a lowgrade Mother, but an Astronomer? A near-sighted astronomer who can't do math? At least in Motherhood I only had to count up to 3, & they all stayed within close-vision range, at least at first.

[...] Is there really a Raccoona Hopkins or is she you? [...]

Love!

* * *

24 Oct 74

O Dearest Bear:

(Perhaps you are getting tired of Bears. I will find something new. Or begin, transparent, Dear Ursula.)

Really, I start a letter to you like an exhausted traveller flinging himself through the gate of the Sunrise Lands. All the duty stuff down and the crap attended to and Now, AT LAST — the treat. You may write Ursula.

[...] I have some mild news of self, basically very good news but as usual lathered o'er by Tiptree's Invincible Gloom. A hand surgeon is going to rebuild my rotted [arthritic] right hand! Really wonderful, a new operation which should leave me with a workable wrist and thumb. [...] The only problem is the interval. During the first 2-3 months I shall have in effect No right hand. And — practising in advance — I find that left hand is totally uneducated, has apparently been hanging around doing nothing but covering yawns for fifty years. [...]

About this Women thing Jeff Smith is trying to get off the ground. My feeling about it is very positive, I think it worthwhile, a place where some statements can be recorded. (I know you have all pontificated your hearts out at seminars etc. but what good does that do *me*?) Only thing is, Jeff is such a worthy soul. And everyone is so busy-busy. What this thing needs

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is a touch of wildness. Let's have some fun, let's not be good little girls and boys.

My own contrib [...] is going to be an idiosyncratic input from left field [....] One of the things I'm going to say is that after long thought I do believe there are two sexes, which are: Men and Mothers. I see these as biological gestalts, coherent complexes of behavior. But I do not see them as mapped 1-1 onto men and women. I see them as patterns somewhat randomly distributed among men and women, liable to cultural evocation. I also see the Mother pattern as the main one in the sense that it is single-handedly if you will responsible for the survival of the race. (Plus a few other important assets like say the invention of agriculture and animal husbandry.) Mothering is a pattern of nurturance over time, and is tied to the biological substrate — that is, you CANNOT by genius or technology accelerate the development of an infant. Wernher von Braun or Edward Teller cannot have flashes of inventive insight which will result in a great new technical advance in rearing infants. [...] Anyone engaging in "Mothering" — which includes people like old-fashioned Army top sergeants — has to do it on the basic biological terms. [...]

(Secretly I am coming to the conviction that women are closer to true Humans. Are men a disease of the race?)

(And then I read science or put Brahms on the player and think, ah yes, this is a great if sick and dangerous beauty...Maybe by women becoming men too they will save us...)

The truth is I don't know what I think.

Except that what is, is a mess. [...]

For more, see "Women in Science Fiction: A Symposium," ed. Jeffrey D. Smith, Khatru *3 & 4, Nov. 1975 (repr. SF3, 1993). Tiptree's contribution, "With Tiptree Through the Great Sex Muddle," can also be found in the collection* Meet Me at Infinity *(Tor, 2000).*

29 X 74

Dear Tree,

What about work? I mean for what Men do, when it isn't all gone pathological-baboon-Foster Dulles. I mean, don't they work? I know it is a dirty word. I know I am a damned, eternally damned, Puritan Cotton-

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mouth Mather & everybody since D. H. Lawrence has hated work & the Work Ethic is an exploded turnip, I know. Only only only when I look at people it seems to me that they WANT to work, not just for money, profit motive is merely cultural, no they *want* to, & when they are doing it & doing it well is when they are serene of mind and beautiful to look upon.

What the Baboonmales have done in the last 200 yrs is ruin work for most people, make it either too hard, killing, or take the Making out of it so that nothing is left but the profit motive & the soul dies at it. But that is not the fault of work, or of the human bodysoul that needs work & rest in the diurnal/seasonal alternation. [...]

And we are *awfully* good at it. All the lovely things men make...the Neolithic stone ax on my desk (swiped from my father's after he died) is so solid, graceful, dozens or hundreds of hours of polishing on the blade. And plowed fields. And chairs & tables & ships & Schubert. The patience, the skill & patience of the man working, that is surely as humane, and more strictly human, than the skill and patience of the woman mothering — and as old — and as needful?

I DO hope your op. is a quick & total success! And I bet once the worst of it's over & there you are one-handed for weeks, you will find La Mano Sinistra much smarter than it's pretending to be now. Take it from ole ambidextrous Ursie, ambidextrosity (?) lies latent in almost everybody. It's just that people are *afraid* of their left hands. Their left brain keeps saying I am the master! I am the master! and the right brain crouches down & says Yassuh Massa Ah'm jes a inep' uncouth clod, suh. Until the forces of the Leftist Liberation Front march through waving their banners backwards...Did you ever try writing lefthanded backwards, Tip? Stop snorting. Try it. Detach your bossy left brain, silence it, make it look away, even. Tell it, shut up, I'm not writing, I'm lefting. (It really is an interesting experience — you can *feel the gears disengage*[...].) Most people can do it, once they realise they can do it. Now I admit that it is damned hard to *read*. Unless you're a Da Vinci buff. But once you see you can do it backwards it's much easier to do it forwards, for some reason. As for typing here i am trying it lefthanded. yes i see what you mean jesus this is maddening. feh. i think if i were in your gloves i wd work on the handwriting. — You GOT to, you don't think I can get through a winter Treeless, do you?

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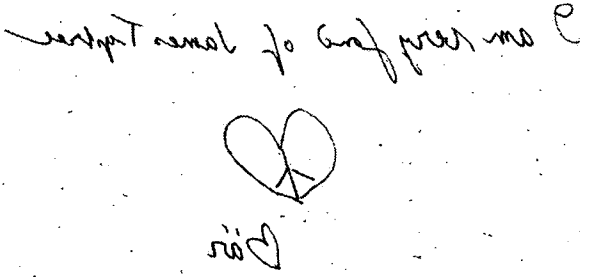
[...] Hey, Tree, if I am so Ewige Mutterlich, how come I mostly write about men, anyhow? Even my Brother the Shrink asked me that this week! I have some theories about it (mostly copped from Jung) but none of them really convince me. What I want to know is is the *question* legitimate. Left to myself I never would have asked it. But now everybody asks me it. Why do you always write about men. Weird.

[...]



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2 Nov 74

Heil, Ewige Mutterlich!
(I mean, Hello Bear dear —)

This is writ on eve of disappearing, O jesus the things I haven't attended to. Still haven't done the Jeff thing but I will if it takes all night. Probably be stoned downhill for it — or everybody will tactfully decide it's just irrelevant and talk about something else. So be it...

Yeah, of course you're right about Work and its beauties, I guess that's what keeps many of us going. But are you sure that Work has not its genesis in the maternal pattern? Every primitive society I've seen the women, who were all forced to be Mothers, did most of the work, not only drudgery but building, making, designing, brewing, clearing land etc. One of the staunchest Wisconsin farm Mothers I know is at this minute out in the freezing woods with a team and her son, skidding logs. Skillfully, forcefully, to a Plan...Maybe Work is a Human development but I think

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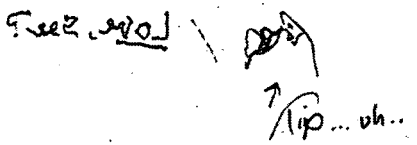
it is more related to Mothering — in its extended sense — than to the male sex pattern. [...]

Why shouldn't a Mother write about men? (But of course, I really see us as all human beings for 45 of our 46 chromosomes' worth, with some of us, some of the time, tincted with one or the other — or both — of the reproductive patterns.) I can see no reason why Mother Grizzly should not be an expert on Father Grizzly, nor why she should not have empathy with Boy Grizzly, nor why she should not *be* Boy Grizzly some or all of the time. More importantly, I see her (or him) as basically simply Grizzly, interested & writing about anything.

Of course also in our weird society today the men have arrogated to themselves so much of the action — and in our folly perhaps men have originated some interesting types of action. So you may be resistant to the social attack which would stuff you into the "feminine" bag — or the terribly distorted contemporary "mother" bag — and claiming your freedom by writing about unbagged men. You may write from a she-[Bear] standpoint some day when you are ready. Or you may not. It depends on where your sense of reality leads you, on what you *want* to do...I see this as if one followed, haltingly, the Mole of Personal Truth which swims beneath the ground on its unknown way. When one plunges ahead on a straight above-ground line one sometimes finds oneself on "dead" ground, one had mistaken the course, the deep Mole has turned and is making another way. Then one stumbles back, listening inside and through one's feet...Takes time. [...]

PS...Any chance a woman made that axe??



In October 1976, Tiptree told friends that his mother, a writer and African explorer, had died at her home in Chicago. The obituary for Mary Hastings Bradley in the Chicago Tribune listed only one survivor, a

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daughter, Alice Bradley Sheldon. Tiptree's friend Jeff Smith wrote Sheldon, asking her about her identity but offering to keep it secret. Instead, Sheldon decided to come clean to a few of her correspondents. The first friend she wrote was Le Guin.

24 Nov 76

Ursula my dear,

Could I ask you to keep a secret for a shortish while?

The thing is, a Baltimore fan has winkled out my quotes real life identity — I had no idea Chicago obituaries would be splashed around Baltimore, and he wrote me with Proof A through zed. Luckily it was Jeff Smith, whom I'd always promised would be the first to know if there was a secret to Unveil. So of course I said yes he was right and please hold it for awhile (letting Ballantine fumble around with this silly novel, etc.) (and also sparing me an avalanche for which I'm ill-prepared, loss of friends, etc.). Two parentheses in one sentence being enough, let me take a breath and start in again.

The thing is, I want you, alone, to know first from me because of our special relation. I write this feeling a great & true friendship is wavering on the balance, about to slide away forever to the dark. But — this is important — I never wrote you anything but the exact truth, there was no calculation or intent to deceive, other than the signature which over 8 years became just another nickname; everything else is just plain me.

The thing is, I am a 61-year-old woman named Alice Sheldon — nickname Alli — solitary by nature but married for 37 years [*sic* — it was 31] to a very nice man considerably older, who doesn't read my stuff but is glad I like writing it.

(I told you, or somebody, it would be the anticlimax of the year.)

All the rest is true, the Army, business, government, academe [...]

Maybe you would prefer to know what I look like. Five ft 8, blond-brown hair going greystreak, thin, vague remains of a young woman who grinned a lot and was said to be good-looking visible under the 61 years of skinniness and wrinkles; like all depressed people like to laugh a lot; active in convulsive spurts. Wear mostly pale blue or tan cords, shirts or turtle-necks, sawed-off nails, flat feet, passion for gardening. [...] When I get dressed up to Go Out I prance a little, like a plush horse. Slather self

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with Chanel 19 or Joy or Diorissima. (Smells, important.) Smoke — lately like the proverbial chimney. Handy with a screwdriver. Get crushes on people whose work or souls I admire.

So now you know...But the funny thing, I swear Tiptree has a funny reality of his own. The name came from seeing a marmalade jar in the Giant's imported food section. Maybe he was waiting there for incarnation [...].

Ursula, Ursula, I am petrified. All the friends, the sf world — will they take it as "deception"? Will I have any friends left? Will the women who mean so much to me see it all as an evil put-on? I never *felt* evil. [...]

Well dear Starbear an old age is dead and time to begin a new. But I think I'm finished. I had been planning to gradually shift over to that other pen-name, Raccoona Sheldon, and phase Tip out that way. (Funny thing; editors who are screaming for Tiptree stuff send back Raccoona's mss with beer-can marks on them — well, not actually that bad, but almost.)

If there's anything I forgot to mention I should have, just ask.

Tip says goodbye to a very dear friend and all that is hers.

Let me know what you think if you're still speaking to

Tip/Alli

***

28 XI [1976]

Dearest TREE,

oh strange, most strange, most wonderful, beautiful, improbable — Wie geht's, Schwesterlein? sorella mia, sistersoul! [...] Do you know what? I don't think I have ever been *surprised* before. Things have happened but when they happen one thinks Oh, of course, this had to Be, etc., deep in my prophetic soul I Knew, etc. — but not this time, by God! And it is absolutely a delight, a joy, for some reason, to be truly absolutely flatfootedly surprised — it's like a Christmas present! don't ask me why, I don't know. — I will now proceed to tell you one thing that has made me slightly unhappy in our peculiar & extremely precious-to-me relationship: I had thought, I wonder if Tiptree is not a homo, and unable to talk about it, having been hurt too often, or because I am so blatantly hetero-wife-mother-etc etc, but that would explain why he sounds very alone,

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and also why he has this marvellous insight into women just like E.M. Forster or Angus Wilson, and oh hell why can't I *ask* him, but I can't, and so there will always be this sort of vast lacuna or gap in our Meeting of Minds...I am a coward not to ask, but one cannot pry into what might be an area of great pain & privacy, etc...So, there was a little knot of sexual unhappiness & reticence, which always bothered me, and which you have now BLOWN INTO SMITHEREENS and I want to laugh, also slightly to cry, because the whole thing now is on this huge and unexpected scale of real and total reversal — only what does reversal mean? Explain to me, my Gethenian Friend. No, don't, you got enough worries! — I know something I will miss: in writing you, the slight edge of flirtation...I do like to flirt, to bat the eyes just a trifle, I like the little edge of sexual tension between men & women that is there even in letters, I enjoy that & will miss it between us, who knows, maybe Tip will miss it too? because you needn't pretend, you know, that there isn't any Tip & never was nor never will be; I knew my Tree *that* well, & to hell with gender. But Tip is also Alli & I can't flirt with Alli, never could flirt with women, the tension just isn't there for me; which is why, of course, my few dearest friends have been women, Jean who died, Jane & Natalie. [...] I don't know about people's reactions, I suppose there are some who resent being put on, but it would take an extraordinarily small soul to resent so immense, so funny, so effective & fantastic & ETHICAL a put-on. Why should anybody mind? Why shouldn't they be delighted? I can't imagine, honestly. [...] About Raccoona, by the way, there some of your truelovers did kind of suspect something. Vonda and I have wondered if Raccoona wasn't Tiptree, several times in the past. However, I will tell you stranche ting: I really & truly don't like any of Raccoona's stories I've read (only 2 I think, or 3) as well as most of Tip's. They *are* different. [...] Raccoona, I think, has less control, thus less wit and power. She seems a good deal younger than Tip. — There is no reason of course why she shouldn't grow up. Though a first name like Raccoona is a very heavy burden on a growing girl...but hell, if Margaret Drabble can make it... [...] Again I think all your friends will be as childishly pleased with you as I am — and as for what the Sf world says, my God, Allitree, who cares? what does it matter? I hope their little eyes widen & their little mouths fall open.[...]

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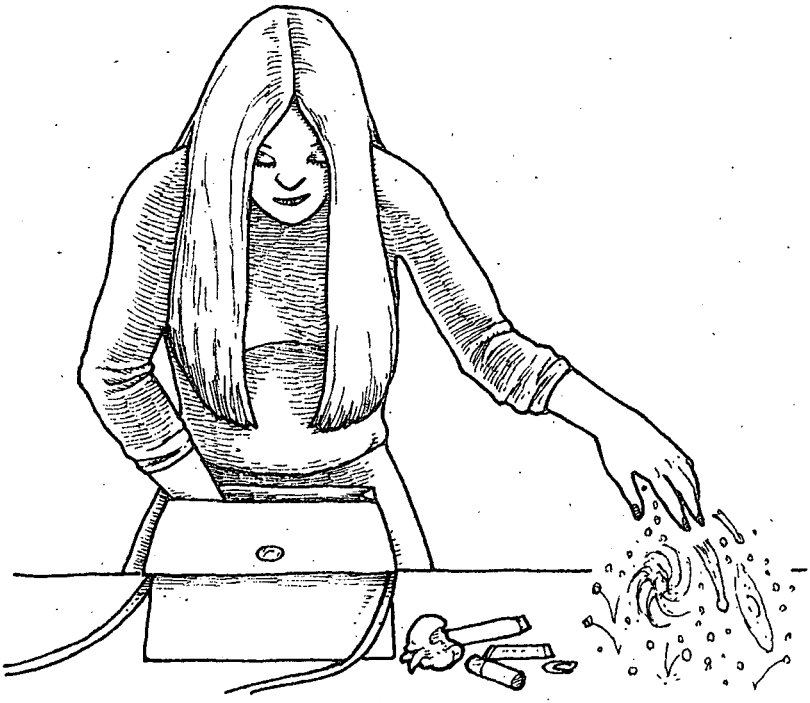
Tip can say goodbye to me but I bloody well won't say goodbye to Tip, why do I have to? can't I just say hello to Alli, Oh Welcome, Alli! I only wish all my friends were like you! And love to Ting and health and luck —

and love
Ursula the Bear


WE WILL LEARN THAT GOD DIDN'T SO MUCH CREATE THE UNIVERSE AS FIND IT IN HER PURSE WHEN SHE WAS LOOKING FOR SOMETHING ELSE.
SPECULATIONS
Hong

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

The Goth Squad

"About half of teenage goths have deliberately harmed themselves or attempted suicide, a new study suggests. But joining the modern subculture — which grew out of the 1980s gothic rock scene — may actually protect vulnerable children, researchers say."

—"Goth subculture may protect vulnerable children," *New Scientist*, 14 April 2006.

SO A BUNCH of us were just coming out of the Hot Topic store at the Edgar Allan Poe Mall when we bumped into those creepy new kids, Tanith, Poppy, and Storm.

Now, I don't care how many times you get held back in junior high, there's no way you're going to look as old as these three, even when you're a senior. All the white face makeup and eyeshadow and black lipstick in the world — and these "girls" wore at least half of that amount — couldn't conceal the fact that they were all at least as old as my Mom. Poppy seemed to be the youngest, followed by Storm, then Tanith. But even Poppy was at least in her twenties.

Yet the principal had introduced them a week ago in a special assembly as "transfer students."

Dressed totally Goth, like three leather-strapped and metal-studded ravens, they were as fake as Michael Jackson's nose. But none of us could figure out why they had been sent to our school. They didn't try to nark any students out or entrap us in Columbine-type schemes. All they'd done so far was set up MySpace pages where they raved about Marilyn Manson and begged us to be their friends. Weird. So we mostly just ignored them.

But now, here, away from the halls of Ligeia High School, it was gonna be kinda hard to pretend they didn't exist.

Especially when Tanith called out to me like we were best buds.

"Drew! It's so spectacularly

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tragic to see you! Are you checking out the Goth stuff in this store? It's the best! Have you seen those Demonia Metal Plate boots? Aren't they so gruesome?"

Lacey, Courtney and Britney clumped protectively up behind me like a wall I could rely on for support. I looked down my nose at Tanith. "I'm sorry, I don't go for that kind of fashion. I was looking for a new Green Day hoodie."

Tanith made a face. "Those guys are okay, I guess. But wouldn't you rather have one of those Slipknot or Ed Gein or Edward Scissorhands tops?"

"Eeeyeuw! Gross! How can you guys like that morbid stuff?"

Poppy said, "It's not morbid — not if you look at it right. Death is a part of life. Pain and suffering can be beautiful too."

"Not that you actually have to indulge in such things," Storm kicked in. "But it doesn't hurt to look at what scares you."

"That's how you gain power over it," Tanith added.

I rolled my eyes. "What-*ever*!"

Lacey, Courtney, and Britney took a few steps away, and I started to follow.

"Where are you girls going?" asked Tanith.

"To the food court."

"Can we come too?"

I shrugged. "It's a free mall."

After we got our food — pizza and tacos and fries — me and my friends took up one table while Tanith, Poppy, and Storm sat down next to us at another. The old Goths made a point of eating black licorice and black jelly beans and drinking green stuff they called "absinthe" out of a hip flask, like that was supposed to tempt us away from our deliciously greasy treats. The four of us tore into boys and music and TV shows, while the three ravens hovered on the edges of our conversation, looking for a way in.

Lacey was talking about a Weezer concert she had gone to when the Goths found an opening.

"So I was in line for T-shirts and this bitch cuts right in front of me — "

Poppy leaned across the aisle like she was diving for the last french fry. "Do you girls ever cut yourself?"

We all stared at the Goths like they still thought Uggs were hip this season. After a while I said, "What can you possibly be talking about?"

Storm said, "You know, using a razor blade or even your fingernails on your own skin, so the pain covers up your bad feelings."

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"There's no shame in doing it," said Tanith. "But we can show you how you don't even have to."

"Listen," I said, "when I feel crappy I just eat a whole pint of Cherry Garcia — "

But the Goths weren't listening to me or my friends at all. Instead, they plowed ahead into this mammoth discussion of all things Goth. There was no chance for us to break away, and we missed out on hooking up with tons of cute guys passing by, who avoided the Goths like the plague.

For the next hour we had to sit and listen to what amounted to a history of Goth literature and music and fashion, how great the whole lifestyle was. Laurell Hamilton, Trent Reznor, Tim Burton — you'd think they were God's gift to teenagers. Goths were a community, a philosophy, a refuge from the uncaring modern society. When you were a Goth, you were never alone. Goths had the answer to everything.

The whole one-sided discussion was more boring than Ms. Tanner's physics class. I felt myself nodding off several times. But at last the three women ran out of canned talk. They all looked at us hopefully.

"So," Tanith said, "do you girls think you might join us?"

"As Goths?"

"Sure."

"Not," I said, "if being a Goth meant that I would never have another zit or gain another unwanted pound or have to take another test. Not if being a Goth meant I would get into the college of my choice totally free. Not if being a Goth meant I would win *American Idol* without having to open my mouth."

"Uh-huh." "Me too." "What she said."

The Goths collapsed like balloons that had lost all their air.

"That does it," said Storm. "This is useless. I'm turning in my corset."

"Right behind you, girl," said Poppy.

"No, you can't give up now — " Tanith begged her partners.

Now that they weren't pretending anymore, I decided to ask the Goths outright what they were doing.

Tanith looked at me with a glimmer of hope. "As you might've guessed, we're not really students — "

"Well, duh!"

"We're part of a new government outreach program. It's been scientifically determined that the Goth subculture can serve as a protective support structure for teens at risk. So we've been commissioned by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to go undercover and

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recruit young adults into it. But it's not as easy as I first imagined it would be."

"Of course not! By the time a kid starts the ninth grade, they're already totally set on their future path. Jock, stoner, punk, granola, brainiac — You're locked in tight. You're not gonna have any luck with conversions at our age."

The Goths put their heads together then and began whispering. Me and my friends got up and redid our lipstick and got ready to go.

"One minute," Tanith called out. "We need your advice."

"Sure. What's the question?"

"Would you have joined the Girl Scouts when you were younger if the uniforms were all black?"

"According to the augurs, you should kill your father or major in English."

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We're pleased to bring you, after too long an absence, a new story by Amy Casil, whose past contributions to our pages include "Mad for the Mints" and "To Kiss the Star." Those of you who missed these stories will be glad to know that her second story collection is scheduled for publication later this year. (Her first, Without Absolution, *is also still in print, as is her novel* Imago.*) "Perfect Stranger" is a troubling vision of the near future.*

Perfect Stranger

By Amy Sterling Casil

THE RAIN FALLS IN SHEETS across the yard, another pane of glass beyond our windows.

Would you like it warmer, Mr. Gill?

The house pings once. Twice.

"No," I say. "It's fine the way it is."

Thank you very much, the house says.

Just like anybody else, the house likes to talk to somebody. I imagined this as a great feature. I'm an ergonomic architect; I designed it.

Denny is asleep in his room. You'd think at fifteen, he'd be too old to take a nap. But he's wiped out after soccer.

Carolyn threw Denny's football out today. The foam rubber football I gave him when he was four years old.

It was old, she said. Falling apart. He didn't want it anymore.

I thought, if he really doesn't want the football, maybe he could say. I tried asking.

But right then, Denny was off to soccer practice, then a study session, then the game. Now, he's sleeping. This is what happens when they're in high school.

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Carolyn says I should be proud. Proud he's such an athlete. And a scholar.

And I guess I'm a gentleman.

The rain comes down like liquid leaded glass.

The gardeners have taken the trash all the way to the curb once again. It's a very long way to the end of the driveway.

I return with half of Denny's football.

She must have taken shears to it. A lightning strike of rage flashes. If she were home right now....

Your body temperature is lower than normal, Mr. Gill, the house chimes in its chimey voice.

"I've been out in the rain," I mutter.

Would you like some soft, fluffy towels? the house asks.

I want the other half of the football. I'll glue it back together. But I smile and grunt an assent, to which the house responds.

Outside, the rain sleets down, a thousand tiny sticks pattering on a thousand tin drums. Nah, not drums. It's just our solar panels.

Denny was born with HLHS. That's an acronym for hypoplastic left heart syndrome. Hypoplastic left heart syndrome is universally fatal, if left untreated. Even now, there are babies that do not survive, even with full-length clone DNA therapy administered *in utero.*

When at five months of pregnancy, Carolyn went for a high-level ultrasound that determined Denny had HLHS, it seemed like the most natural thing in the world to try gene therapy. The doctors explained how the heart healed itself as the baby grew.

It was raining that day.

Pouring outside while we listened to the neonatal geneticist explain how the procedure worked. We were so lucky, she said. Before gene therapy, babies like Denny could only survive with full heart transplants. She told us about a doctor that had tried baboon hearts to replace broken baby ones.

Apparently, some parents aborted babies diagnosed with HLHS.

"I'd never accept that," I said.

"What?" Carolyn snapped, her hand over her swollen belly. "You'd rather let my baby suffer?"

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I guess I hadn't thought of it that way.

The geneticist explained in the past, babies born with this heart defect were simply left to die. Their hearts barely pumped blood. And they would just fade away.

Maybe that could be less humane than an abortion.

At least that was what we discussed on the way home.

It was a miracle that we had the gene therapy, and that Denny was born whole. And totally healthy.

It was the best moment of my life.

The rain rattles the solar panels as I sort pictures on the computer. Denny in his baby swing. Denny playing with blocks.

I should be working. But I can't focus on the Recreation Center today.

There was one of him holding the fuzzy book he got from his grandmother. She was so frightened — my mother — when I told her about Denny's heart problem. She didn't understand gene therapy.

Carolyn got on the phone and explained it to her. When Denny was born perfectly healthy, I don't think any of us gave it much more thought.

My mother and Denny sat for hours, reading that little book. *Pat the Bunny*. Her favorite — she insisted on buying it. I have it in my study, in the right drawer of my desk.

At one past garage sale, it had been another item bound for the Dumpster. I put the half-football with *Pat the Bunny*.

Denny was about three when he learned to read.

I sorted those pictures, too.

They say a man's not supposed to be interested in pictures. Mementos. The man lives his life, and the woman saves it. Well, what they say is true and what happens are sometimes two different things.

There was another book Denny liked. *Stan the Hotdog Man*. We read it over and over.

And one day, Denny started talking about Stan. It dawned on me that he was reading.

"Carolyn, come here!" I called.

She came running in from the kitchen, alarmed.

"Honey, I think he's reading."

Her face changed. "Horse manure," she said.

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"No, really," I said.

Denny then read a whole page of *Stan the Hotdog Man* in his small voice. He beamed proudly up at me.

"See?" I said.

"You've read it to him so many times, he's memorized it," she said.

"Oh," I said.

It was some time later when I learned that by memorizing the book, Denny was, indeed, reading. By that time, he was in kindergarten.

I sorted some more of the pictures from later years, and looked pensively out at the rain. Denny was still sleeping.

I think I always hoped that my son would play football.

Back before I met Carolyn, I played ball. Played all the way through sophomore year in college. Sidelined by a knee injury. I guess I was a pretty good running back, if a little bit underweight. The guys were all into steroids back in those days. There was no such thing as gene augmentation. All we had were good, old-fashioned workouts and protein shakes. And maybe a shot in the butt for guys that were really dedicated.

Or crazy.

You could blow your heart out on steroids. They made you break out all over. Gave you erectile dysfunction. Made you crazy.

Happened to a lot of my friends. It's a good thing I figured out that trap before I fell into it.

I guess I did try it a few times.

Drops of rain dappled the window.

Your heart rate has increased, Mr. Gill, the house chimed. *Your core body temperature has dropped.*

"So turn up the heat," I told the house.

I had to say something. Otherwise, it wouldn't leave me alone.

I FOLDED THE BLUE RIBBON neatly into my desk drawer. For math excellence. Why they'd give a math prize to a kid in second grade was beyond me.

When Denny hit second grade, his teacher pointed out that he was reading like a pro, but having trouble with his figures.

"I was never too good with math," I told her. Wasn't that great in reading, either, but I didn't feel compelled to share.

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"You might want to look into some tutoring," she said.

"He's in second grade!" I said.

Carolyn hushed me. "How far is he behind?" she asked.

"Behind?" the teacher asked. "Oh, no — he's not behind."

"Well, there's no reason to worry," I said. "He'll pick it up."

"His times tables," Carolyn said. "Next year he's got to learn the times tables."

"We don't do it that way anymore, Mrs. Gill. Each child is tested individually against his or her own standards."

I didn't precisely follow how there could be enough time to set individual standards, seeing as the kid had just started second grade.

"How far is he behind?" Carolyn asked again.

"He's not behind," the teacher said, a stubborn tone creeping into her voice. "Denny is so bright. I'm sure you'd agree with me that he could do better if he applied himself. That's all I'm trying to say."

"Maybe he just wants to play outside," I said.

"Hush!" Carolyn said. "Gary and I both agree that Denny is bright. And he's got plenty of motivation."

"Well," the teacher said smiling. "Why don't you try that tutoring service, or a math buddy."

A math buddy was like an English buddy, or a foreign language buddy. It was a small, silver, pain-in-the-ass robot that could also vacuum the floor. They were notorious for tripping guys foolish enough to buy them for their kids. A guy in Cleveland broke his neck that way.

I was going to be damned if I'd get one. I would have rather gotten Denny another football.

On the way out to the car, Carolyn looked up at me, concern wrinkling her forehead. "He's falling behind in math," she whispered.

"You don't have to whisper," I told her. "Nobody can hear. Besides, the teacher said he's not behind. We can encourage him."

"Encourage him!" Carolyn snapped. "He can do better, and he will."

"Well, do you think we should try a tutor?" I asked. The thought of locking Denny inside with some greasy-haired high school math geek made me cringe. But even that was a more appealing choice than bringing a gibbering, tortoise-like "math buddy" into the house, so it could trip me on the stairs and turn me into a paraplegic.

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"No," Carolyn said. "Not a tutor."

I felt relieved.

"Have you heard about the new gene therapy?" she asked. "It's just like what they did for Denny's heart defect. Only it can strengthen a child's brain power. I was reading all about it yesterday."

"Oh," I said. I had pretty favorable memories of how they'd fixed Denny's heart. "How does that work?"

"Maybe it's like what they did before. Only they inject the new genetic material into someone's brain. Then it makes a few changes and the person gets smarter."

"Oh," I said. I didn't like the thought of anybody injecting anything into Denny's brain. But I'd learned it was best not to interrupt Carolyn when she was thinking like this. Frankly, it was almost always better just to wait things out. Half the time she forgot about this stuff and never mentioned it again.

"If you're concerned about your son's logical and mathematical abilities, I don't think you've got much to worry about with Denny," Dr. Mandel said. "He's a bright, normal boy."

"But his teacher says he's falling behind in math," Carolyn said. "Can't we do something?"

"I'd recommend a math buddy," the doctor said. "My own daughter has one. She's about Denny's age. She used to hate math, and now she loves it."

"Doesn't that thing get in your way?" I asked — about the math buddy.

"Thing?" the doctor said, looking puzzled. "Oh!" he said, chuckling. "Yeah, it did trip me up once. I fell right off the deck into the pool."

"There's something I don't like about those little robots," I said. "The teacher also suggested a tutor."

"A wise choice," the doctor said. He started to check his personal assistant, a sure sign our time was up. I started to rise, but Carolyn put her hand on my arm.

"Wait," she said. "Can you explain how the procedure works, doctor?"

He paused. I suddenly understood that he was one of those guys who

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never missed a chance to wow others with his special, technical knowledge.

"Well," he said, smiling. "Years ago, we discovered that viruses could be effective transports to load different types of DNA into human — or any other type — of brains. Now we've identified a specific enzyme or cocktail of enzymes that enhances almost every type of brain function. We load the enzymes into a virus, which then transcribes the DNA, and delivers the desired changes to what we once thought were 'unchangeable' brain cells. I'm sure you've heard of people building up their 'extra-sensory perception.'"

Carolyn and I nodded. We'd seen a show about wild-eyed lunatics bending iron and starting fires at a distance the night before.

"It's like an infection," Dr. Mandel said. "But it's one that most people wouldn't mind catching."

"Like a cold?" Carolyn asked.

"Exactly!" Dr. Mandel said. "You do understand. Only in this case, the subject catches the cold in their cerebral cortex, and as healing occurs, so do changes for the better."

"Wow," Carolyn said.

"I'm not sure about this," I said.

"Shhh!" she hushed.

"How old is your son?" the doctor asked.

"Seven," Carolyn said.

"Ah, the perfect age. Look — " he said, leaning across his shiny titanium desk — everybody who was anybody had one of those a few years back — "It's not cheap. But you could make your son into a math genius if you wanted. He wouldn't feel a thing, and a few days later, his abilities would manifest. They'd grow day by day."

"I don't know," I said. It sounded like mad scientist stuff to me. Weren't they trying these techniques on psychotic murderers? If this was so safe and healthy, I figured we would have heard about it in other areas beside criminal rehabilitation and iron-bending firestarters.

"People are doing it all the time," Dr. Mandel said. "You just don't hear about it on the newslinks because improving kids' test scores isn't nearly as big a story as turning a mass-murderer into Mother Teresa."

Carolyn squeezed my hand under the table. "Doctor, we'd like to try," she said.

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"I suppose we could — " Dr. Mandel said, voice slightly uncertain. "Is this necess — "

Carolyn cut me short. "I know he can benefit," she said. "I don't think we mentioned it earlier, but Denny received gene therapy before he was born, to cure a congenital heart defect."

"Oh!" the doctor said. "In that case, he's prequalified. Be sure to fill out all the forms, you two. We're conducting multi-treatment longitudinal studies, and your son is an ideal candidate."

So, Denny got the blue ribbon in math.

He got so into math that he stayed inside almost all the time. He hardly wanted to play with his friends anymore. We were supposed to start Pony League football.

But Denny didn't want to play. He didn't want to try for T-Ball, either.

The only thing he'd talk about was math.

One day, Carolyn pointed out that Denny was getting a little chunky.

"He was size eight last month," she said. "Now I've got to buy the next size up."

"So? My mom told me I grew three sizes and four inches one summer."

"Your mom said all kinds of things," Carolyn said.

Mom had passed last spring. We used to joke about her seeing Denny through high school. It wasn't meant to be.

"Could you give it a rest, Carolyn?" My wife thought that seven months was long enough. For mourning.

She forged ahead. "Denny's getting fat, Gary. We can't let him get overweight."

"So, we'll put him on a diet," I said. I'd been a little chunky when I was his age. When my mom found out how much time I could waste playing video games, she ripped the whole console out of the wall. It was the cold-turkey video game withdrawal method. I lost the weight.

We tried a diet, but Denny was too young to understand why he couldn't eat everything he liked. I wasn't surprised when a couple of frustrating weeks later, Carolyn told me that she'd called Dr. Mandel.

There was of course a gene therapy — the most popular one of all — to deal with unwanted weight gain. This time, the virus carrying altered

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DNA helped to increase some of the hormones in the brain that controlled appetite and metabolism.

Voila! A thin kid.

That was Denny's third treatment.

The rain is imploding on the roof. It's almost in my head.

"Turn up the heat!" I scream.

The house complies. If I didn't know better, I'd almost think that the house was sulking.

After the obesity treatment, Denny started getting into soccer. And discovered his talent for art.

BY THIRTEEN, Denny was Dr. Mandel's best patient. He had even been featured on the cover of *Parenting* with two other kids who had been helped by Dr. Mandel's gene practice. It wasn't exactly as if gene therapy was cutting-edge anymore. Dr. Mandel was known for his "boutique" practice. That meant that he helped parents with money and fine-edged concerns about their children's growth and well-being.

No one really took the dire warnings of the early part of the millennium seriously.

Creating a "master race" and so on. Well, heck. If a person could get a little bit better in some way, and it wasn't hurting them or anybody else, how did that qualify as a "master race?" People without genetic improvements were never looked down upon.

Sure, it was a generational thing. I mean, there were some skin therapies for people my age and Carolyn's age. And they had learned how to rejuvenate most of the vital organs. When I was young, it was a big deal for anybody to make it to age 100. These days, you had to hit 120 and look really good to get your picture on the newslinks.

It was the kids who benefited. If somebody would have told me back in the day that a Pugsley kid could turn into a hunk in a matter of weeks, or a kid with no chin could suddenly acquire a nice, square one without surgery, I would have laughed out loud. You were what you were born to be.

Up until he was nine or ten, Denny's eyes were kind of a hazel color. Now they were piercing, bright blue. The girls went crazy over his eyes. I mean, the kid was a good-looking fifteen, but—

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The house chimed. Somebody was calling.

"Gary here," I answered.

"Is Denny home?" came a petite, snippy little voice.

"Yes, but he's sleeping. Tired out after his game." I didn't share that he'd had yet another treatment — this one to deal with a few pimples, of all things. Kids slept a lot after a treatment. Body change and metabolic readjustment, supposedly. Dr. Mandel likened it to "growing pains."

"Oh, well, like we were supposed to be...studying...for chemistry tonight," the little voice said. After a moment's pause, she added, "This is Candy."

"I thought you were Apple," I said. She sounded like the girl Denny had introduced me to named "Apple." Apple was a cheerleader, and —

"No, I'm Candy," she said vehemently. "I don't see how you could confuse us. Apple is completely shallow and self-centered and she can't pass math. I'm the captain of the Debate Team."

"Oh," I said. *Of course* she was Debate Team Captain. "My mistake. Apple calls a lot."

"Oh," Candy said. "I see."

"Denny hardly ever takes her calls," I said. This was utterly untrue, but for some reason, I enjoyed the thought of the little white lie that was involved.

"Oh," she said, voice brightening. "Well, just tell Denny that I called. Thank you, Mr. Gill." And she broke the connection.

So I went upstairs.

"Hey," I said, waking Denny. "A girl called."

Denny rose, shaking sleep out of his eyes. "Yeah? Who was it, Dad?"

"Apple," I said. "Wait — no, Candy."

"Candy," Denny said, smiling slyly. "She likes me, I think."

"She's the jealous type too," I said. "What are you doing to attract all these girls, Denny?"

Denny scooted up in bed and swung his legs to the floor. He started rubbing his shoulder. "Hurt it a little bit in the game," he said.

"How'd it go?"

"Not bad," he said. "We won by two goals. I got the last goal."

Of course you did, I thought. I hadn't gone to the game. Somehow, I

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just hadn't wanted to. It was raining. I said it was crazy to play soccer in the rain. Watching soccer in the rain was even crazier.

I couldn't put my finger on the real reason I hadn't gone to the game. Carolyn was at work, of course. She had a fulfilling, demanding job at the local art museum. She put together their brochures and maintained their web presence. Everybody says what artistic talent she has. It's really amazing how Denny has the same abilities — maybe even more so. Paintings, drawings, vector art — Denny does it all. He would be taking sculpture, if it didn't conflict with soccer practice.

Denny got up and started to strip off his clothes. He was only fifteen, but his chest and biceps were more muscular than mine. Not just at that age — now.

He sprinted into his bathroom and called for the house to turn on the shower.

"Did you order more aftershave, Dad?" he called.

"Yeah," I said. "Yesterday."

"Oh, right," Denny said. "It's all full now — I can see it."

Of course I ordered aftershave. When you work from home, all those little chores seem to fall on you. Tell the house what to cook for dinner, tell it to keep the different meals ready at different times for everyone's schedule, see to it the laundry schedule isn't too full and somebody — namely Denny — isn't going to have to run to a soccer game and play in a dirty jersey. Make sure all the plants are watered and trimmed and the rug is vacuumed and the floor polished and there are no lights out and there —

"Hey Dad, what should I do about Candy?" Denny asked from the shower.

"Do about what?"

"She *likes* me, Dad. I like her fine as a friend, but I don't want to get serious. She's just not — "

"What's wrong with her?"

"Nothing," Denny said.

"Well, if there's nothing wrong with her, why don't you like her?" I knew perfectly well what he meant, but I was just playing with his mind.

"I mean *like*, Dad. As in...you know...."

"You're supposed to be the genius," I said. "I don't know, so explain it to me."

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I don't know what I expected to hear. "She's homely, Dad." Or, "She comes on too strong." Or, maybe, "She's pretty nerdy."

"She's a mundane, Dad," Denny said. "I just can't get interested in a girl who's never had any type of modifications."

I said, "Oh."

I sat on the bed. I think it was the way he said it.

Denny came out of the shower, a towel wrapped around his Adonis-like frame. "Dad, you know how it is," he said.

"Yeah," I said.

"I mean, look at Apple. She might not be that smart, but she's got a great body. She does a five-minute mile, and her nails are perfect. I know her hair's not real, but what does that matter? It looks great."

"Apple's a nice girl," I said.

A long time ago when Denny was a baby, my mother came over and we spent the whole day playing. Building towers of blocks. Reading books. Setting up paper and finger paints on the kitchen table. She baked cookies.

I watched my son and my mother playing together. His hair was light brown and wispy over his hazel eyes. Maybe he looked like an old, balding fat guy, but he was just a baby. There was a funny little cleft in his chin. He was clumsy. We worked with him to use his right hand, then his left. Just letting him experiment. She grabbed his outstretched hands in hers and lifted him up. He giggled and stood and toddled, then soon sat back down. He was only nine months.

Even a genetically modified baby can't walk at nine months.

And it comes to me.

Why I didn't go to the game.

I looked in Denny's eyes a long while. Bright blue, they were. There's been nobody with blue eyes in my family for a long time. Maybe there never were. I can't say those were Carolyn's eyes, either. She has muddy brown eyes, and hates them.

Denny started to laugh, feeling uncomfortable. "Hey, Dad, what are you looking at me like that for?"

I can't reply.

"I'm just — you know — " I say, finally. I look over at Denny's artwork. At the trophies for soccer. Math ribbons. His poster, running for class president last year.

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Yeah, he won.

"Your mom threw your little kid football out this morning," I said.

"What football?" Denny asked.

It was no big deal, I guess. I really didn't know how to explain.

I heard him on the phone after dinner.

Talking up that Apple.

"Yeah, baby. I know it's hard. But everyone's parents are pretty much mundanes. You should see my Dad."

It wasn't like I hadn't had my own rough spots with my Dad. I wanted to run in and grab the vox away from Denny. Yell. Tell her to respect her parents. Tell him.

Denny never knew my father. Carolyn's Dad was an old fart who painted bowls of fruit and sad-eyed clowns.

He wasn't a bad guy. He was just kind of...distant.

There was no way to make Denny comprehend that my Dad had been a great guy. I mean, I hated Dad when he grounded me. I hated him when he took my car away. I hated him when he flushed my sad little pot stash down the can.

He taught me responsibility. He taught me what it meant to be a man.

A mundane.

Hush my feet, I told the house much later that night. The house could do that, you know. Make it quiet to walk, or very noisy. Only the administrator could tell it to do that. I know a lot of parents that use this feature.

I was sleeping in my study again. No. I was lying on the couch in the study, pretending to sleep.

It was easier. Carolyn always has some book she's reading or some work she's going over and that light in my eyes drives me crazy.

I was turning the whole thing over in my mind.

All the little treatments. Yeah, it was right to fix Denny's heart.

We had to fix Denny's heart.

Denny was the only son Carolyn and I were ever going to have.

I used, back in the day, you know. Stacking. I was juiced up all the time.

I thought it made me more of a man.

They said it was a minor miracle that Carolyn had gotten pregnant, since I had a sperm count of about three. Three million particles per ml.

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And after that, it went down even more. They call that sterile.

She could have left me. Maybe if I had been in her shoes, I would have. She could have had a lot more kids with a healthy man.

But this was our son. This was Denny.

One time, my Dad was watching me at football practice. I caught a right screen pass we'd been practicing a long time and raced away. My legs were wings. The scrimmagers hurled themselves at me in slow motion. I was flying, the wind whipping through the bars of my helmet. Nobody could touch me.

My Dad had this look on his face when he ran out on the field after that scrimmage.

We didn't need to say too much. In fact, we didn't say anything.

I was his son, and he was my Dad.

Then it started to rain, and we headed for our car.

I wandered into the kitchen, still remembering.

"Hey house, I'm going to make a sandwich," I whispered. "I want to use the last of that good bread."

"Do you want me to slice it?" the house asked.

"No," I said. "You know I cut it myself."

"That's right," the house said. It put the bread and knife out on the counter.

"Mustard?"

"Yes."

"Lettuce?"

"No, just bologna."

"Very good," the house said. "Low-fat, high protein."

"Right, house," I said. "Thanks."

I cut the bread for the sandwich. Put mustard on the bread. Slapped down the meat, slapped the whole thing together and stuffed it in my mouth.

Then I started upstairs on quiet feet.

"Don't forget to put your knife in the dishwasher," the house said.

To some questions, house did not require an immediate answer.

In terms of his eyes, they were blue.

A tear rolls down my mundane cheek.

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His chest moves slowly, up and down. His breathing soft, like a cat.

Denny stirs. Moans slightly.

So they dream.

But what dreams come, I can never know.

There was no such face, ever. Not in my house. Not in my line. None of my father's strength. None of my mother's cleft chin. None of us were ever so broad-shouldered.

None of us were any good at math.

We were good with people. We were fast runners, me and Dad.

Denny's a fast runner, too, but different.

One time I visited Dad in the care home. Premature Alzheimer's, they said. It was the last time he'd know my face. Be able to say my name.

"Carolyn and I are having a baby," I told him. "It's going to be a little boy."

He took my hand.

"I'm so glad, Son," he said, his brown eyes warm and lucid. Knowing me and what I said.

I wonder what it will feel like when I'm an old man. Denny won't come. I can't imagine him ever telling me he's going to have a son.

I dream what it will feel like to look into those ice-blue, strange eyes.

Just one stroke. Quick. Hard.

Down into his changed heart. The heart of a perfect stranger.

Denny turns and sighs.

Like a vision, I see my Dad's face. He speaks.

Why did you lose us, Gary? Your Mom — me? For this?

He taught me what it was to be a man.

Outside, the rain falls. It's tapping on the roof like a hundred little cats running up and down.

I listen.

Then I turn and go on my quiet feet back down the stairs.

Outside, the rain is a cold curtain of ice knifing my face. I look up, into the clear, black sky. No stars, nothing. Pines shadowed against the midnight fog.

I know if I just look hard enough, I'll find the other half of the football.

Let the sky darken like soot. Let the wind gather.

Let it rain.

— For Anthony Sterling Rodgers

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

FUNKY, FUNKY MOSCOW

BY THE time this sees print, the summer movies will be in full-on gargantuan bloat, diplodocus-sized blockbusters lumbering through the multiplexes in a confused herd, searching for their screenplays, deafening one and all with their digitized grunts, leaving piles of waste in their wake...and so the column is intended this month to be a metaphorical hit of Oust or Febreze (birch-scented to correspond with its Russian theme), something to disperse those Cretaceous vapors and remind us that there are films not inspired by video games, rare though they may be.

During the post-glasnost period, the Russian cinema has sputtered along in semi-secret, at its best producing a number of tight, low-budget crime films and a handful of masterpieces: the Stalin-era epics *Burnt by the Sun* and *Durga*; the post-glasnost naturalism of *The Return*; the magical realist films, *Prisoners of the Mountain* and *Repentance*, to name a few. The fantastic genres, however, have been represented mainly by lame-ish fantasies and, until recently, Russia's last distinctive genre picture was Georgi Danielya's 1986 hilarious dystopian comedy, *Kin-Dza-Dza*, which, despite its minimalist production values, also qualifies as a masterpiece in terms of writing and general execution, begging to be judged alongside such pictures as Gilliam's *Brazil* and Luc Besson's *Dernier Combat*.

Heavily influenced by the satire of the late Robert Sheckley, *Kin-Dza-Dza* tells the story of two schlemiels, Dyadya Vova and Skripach, who are confronted by an alien while, respectively, going to buy pasta and returning a violin to

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its owner. When they push a button on a device the alien carries, they are transported to the planet Plyuk. The galaxy in which Plyuk is situated, Kin-Dza-Dza, is essentially an interstellar slum, and Plyuk itself is a post-apocalyptic desert, the ruins of skyscrapers and carnivals and so forth poking up from the sands. The beings who dwell there resemble humans and can read thoughts, even those of Dyadya Vova and Skripach, a condition that has pared down their spoken language to a very few words (since there is no subtitled DVD available, this assists the non-Russian speaker in watching the movie — trust me, a knowledge of Russian, albeit helpful, is not necessary to enjoy this film; subtitles are, however, downloadable online). Though their society has been reduced to the barbaric, with a leader of sorts who spends his days playing infantile games in a pool, they are technologically advanced, having spaceships, bathysphere-shaped fliers that whiz about like helicopters, telephone service between planets (at one point, Dyadya Vova phones home), bizarre underground factories maintained by savages, and yet, what Plyukians covet above all things are ordinary household matches. The most salient bit of technology in their possession is a device that allows one to determine to which group (a distinction something like that of race) a Plyukian belongs by pointing it at an individual, whereupon one of two lights switches on: a green light, signifying "Good," or an orange light, signifying "Bad."

The plot of *Kin-Dza-Dza* revolves about Dyadya Vova's and Skripach's attempts to return to Earth, but the actual focus of the picture is on the problems facing Russia during those days before the breakup of the Soviet Union, anticipating a grim Plyukian-like future. Now, some twenty years later, we are presented with a new Russian film (a series of films, actually) that, although no masterpiece, is nevertheless of significance and looks forward to a Russian future that, while still uncertain, offers a glint of promise. I'm speaking, of course, of *Day Watch*, the second in the "Watch" trilogy, directed by Timur Bekmambetov and based on the novels of Sergei Lukyanenko, who also plays the mage Ruslan in the movie.

To reset, in the first film (it is, by the way, impossible to comprehend the second without having seen the first), we meet Anton (Konstantin Khabensky), an everymannish member of a group of

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"Light" wizards, vampires, witches, et al, who form the titular Night Watch. They patrol Moscow during the evening hours, often in a jet truck, and keep tabs on the opposed yet similarly constituted group who serve the Dark and keep watch over the day. This is a condition of a truce negotiated a thousand years before, a truce that threatens to be broken by the emergence of two "Great Ones," Anton's foster son, the young vampire, Yegor, who will come into his full powers on the occasion of his next birthday, and the beautiful blond Svetlana (Mariya Poroshina, previously featured in the *Sopranos*-like Russian crime drama, *Brigada*), a virginal white witch under a curse. Yegor has been taken by the Dark group, the Day Watch, and is being trained for an evil destiny under the guidance of the black magician, Zavulon. Both groups have the power to enter "the Gloom," an alternate reality wherein Moscow exists as a deserted ruin.

The opening of *Day Watch* takes us back to the days of Tammerlane and, in an impressive CGI sequence, shows that same warrior penetrating a city that is half maze, half fortress, intending to steal the Chalk of Fate, with which it is possible, literally, to rewrite history and reverse the flow of time. In accomplishing this feat, he demonstrates the uses to which the chalk can be put. We flash forward in time to a year after the events of the first film. Svetlana and Anton are now partnered, engaged in patrolling the streets of Moscow as part of the Night Watch. When several Dark vampires are killed under mysterious circumstances, Anton is framed for the murders and must direct most of his energies to escaping the vengeance of the Day Watch. Meanwhile, the day of Yegor's majority is approaching and Svetlana, too, is coming into her full powers. Should the two of them meet and blood be shed, the ancient war will be resumed.

If all this seems a tad confusing, it is. As a director, Bekmambetov has a considerable way to go before achieving a lucid narrative style and the script has a tendency to devolve into a mish-mash of pointless action sequences and equally pointless yet impressive CGI scenes. In one such, a dog-collared vampire woman drives her red Mazda up and around the sides of a Moscow apartment building at a height of over a hundred feet, all to no express purpose save, perhaps, character development; in

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another, two trucks play chicken and the smaller one tunnels through the other. Relentless product placement and a soundtrack that incorporates a godawful Russian MTV-style metal band further assist in blurring both the characters and storyline.

Sounds like a Hollywood picture, no?

For American audiences, long accustomed to an abundance, often a superfluity, of exposition, Bekmambetov's sketchy narration will be a hard row to hoe; but by the time the movie has its North American release, Fox Searchlight will have overseen a new edit, cleaned up the subtitles, and, hopefully, a happy balance will have been struck between lucidity and pacing.

The first hour or so of *Day Watch* plays like a combination buddy movie/romantic comedy (the picture is generally brighter in tone and less horrific than *Night Watch*) and mainly consists of Svetlana, who is secretly (she thinks) in love with her partner, and Anton patrolling together. While Anton covertly (he thinks) searches for his son and for the Chalk, which he hopes can save him (it turns out to have been hiding, to humorous effect, in plain sight), Svetlana tries to cover up the evidence that he is doing so. At one point, the movie takes a funny and erotic turn when Anton has to switch bodies with another Night Watch agent, Olga (the owl-woman from the first picture), and thus is forced to deal with Svetlana woman-to-woman. But things grow increasingly chaotic, the plot — a thin one, as is often the case with second parts of trilogies — disappears in a maelstorm of event and special effects, and suddenly we are in the midst of the big finish, Yegor's birthday party, attended — I'm told — by a number of actual Moscovite celebrities. During this lengthy set piece, Anton is poisoned, the Great Ones are brought together, everybody discos, and Yegor uses a Russian-style yo-yo as a weapon of mass destruction, eventually reducing Moscow to the ruin we have previously seen in the Gloom. Will Svetlana be able to neutralize Yegor? Will the Chalk of Fate, which spends a good bit of time rolling about the floor under the feet of the celebrants, be employed to good or evil effect? You'll have to tune in to find out.

What distinguishes these movies from the Hollywood movies they obviously seek to ape is the endearing quirkiness of their imagery (deadly yo-yo, Chalk of Fate, owl-woman, a parrot morphing into a rock 'n' roller in a limo, etc.) and

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their unique energy. Set amid the omnipresent dinginess and dilapidation of a Moscow still suffering its post-Soviet hangover, plagued by ruthless *mafiyas* and a shaky economy, the film gives us a sense of the vital new city bubbling up from beneath this particular Gloom. Though the filmmaking is derivative, quoting liberally from Terry Gilliam, *The Matrix*, Tarkovsky, and the source material is, ho hum, another battle between Good and Evil, *Day Watch* revels in its influences. It's as if Dostoyevsky, Marilyn Manson, and Roger Corman were collaborating behind the scenes. Even if you lose track of the plot, if you just relax, you may find that having to watch closely and to figure out what's happening and where the picture is going to be a pleasant experience — more pleasant, at any rate, than the dimension of bored lostness one enters during a viewing of abominations such as *Underworld 6: The Engorging*; the latest house-tenanted-by-evil-spirit goreapalooza (will it be *An American Haunting*, a film whose title implies that all previous hauntings have been unwholesomely un-American?); or *Final Destination 13: We're Not Kidding — This Is Really It!* Chances are if you were a fan of *Night Watch*, you'll enjoy the sequel; if you weren't, *Day Watch* probably won't change your mind about the series. But the fact remains that for all his directorial shortcomings, Bekmambetov has breathed new life into a very old story, and the largest question attaching to the Watch trilogy is whether the third film, *Dusk Watch*, shot in English, featuring American actors, and using Hollywood script writers, will lose its creative spark in translation.

I'd be remiss if I failed to give a shout-out to the H. P. Lovecraft Historical Society's *The Call of Cthulhu*, a film based on one of Lovecraft's most famous stories. The classic story, which dates from 1927, prior to the advent of the "talkies," has now been brought to the screen in the style of a classic Twenties silent movie, with a haunting original score. Utilizing a mix of modern and vintage camera techniques, the HPLHS has created the most faithful Lovecraft adaptation yet. The cultists of the Louisana bayous, the non-euclidean geometry of R'lyeh...it's all there. Forty-seven minutes (the DVD has over an hour of extras) of H. P. Lovecraft, as the man himself might have imagined it on film, a period spectacle that took eighteen months to produce and provides title cards in

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twenty-four languages (including Catalan, Galician, Gaelic, and Luxembourgish) so as to appeal to Lovecraft fans around the globe. And appeal it should, to all fans of fine fantasy...as should the other films mentioned, constituting an uncommon break in the weather of bad movies that has lately overtaken us, doubtless a byproduct of some global deficiency, a new ice age, perhaps, which, sadly, is not at all refreshing despite coming in the midst of summer's heat.

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Michael Libling is not to be confused with A. J. Liebling (take note, Harlan Ellison). He is, however, happy to be known as a former student of Mordecai Richler, as well as being known as a master of trivia, a Montreal radio personality, and a distinguished product tester for www.patsypie.com. *He's also well-known for his short stories, many of which have appeared in our pages, including "Timmy Gobel's Bug Jar" and "Christmas in the Catskills." And soon he will be known as the author of this sly story. Many of our early readers (believe it or not) said this story was their favorite of the three takes on Lady Luck.*

If You've Ever Been a Lady

By Michael Libling

GAYLE IS PUTTERING ABOUT in the kitchen when Denny wriggles under their bed to wait. He listens, speculates on the nature of each clink and clack and clatter. Wonders if she might be searching for the carving knife he now holds flat across his chest. One of her prized Tramontinas. The longest, sharpest. A steal on QVC.

Water runs.

It has been a long while since Denny has hidden under a bed. Thirty years, at least. Escaping his father and his belt, his mother and her episodes. Playing games of hide 'n' seek, with friends who rarely sought.

Coffee gurgles. A fresh pot. And she's humming now. That Faith Hill song, what's it called — the one she sings with what's-his-name?

A year ago, no chance he would have fit under any bed. Then he got lucky. Caught some bug on a pepperoni and bacon from Twofer Pizza. Took him months to shake it. Wasn't the best diet he might have come up with, but it sure did the trick.

Heck, Twofers gave him the idea in the first place. Two with one blow.

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So far, his plan has gone off without a hitch. He left home before sunup, made sure to rouse Gayle from her sleep, erasing any doubts he was really gone, not that she would have had any doubts. All month long he had reminded her his flight would be leaving at seven. "*Goddammit, Denny, how many times do you need to tell me? Shut up, already.*" Truth is, he doesn't need to be at the airport till four.

McCreedy, the prick, he doesn't so much as knock. Marches right in like he owns the place, which he does, of course. Least he could have done was give them a break on the rent, considering what Gayle's been slipping him on the side.

Their talk is small. And Gayle, well, she's got this funny, weird laugh Denny has never heard before. Like she's gagging on a canary. Makes him want to crawl under the carpet, never mind the bed.

Mugs on countertop. Toaster pops. Coffee poured. Toast buttered. Spoons in jelly jar. Spoons in sugar bowl. Half-and-half dribbled. Coffee stirred. Virginia Slims lit. And Denny just about cracks up out loud. Gayle. *Virginia Fats* more like it. For every pound he lost, she must have tacked on two.

And just like that, they're in the bedroom, on the bed, and going at it not two feet above him. The big brass bed Gayle's grandma left her. Noisiest bed in the universe. Only thing Denny could never fault was the bounce. Nothing like the old springs.

McCreedy's loafers drop to the floor — shiny new pennies in each, for Christ's sake. Then Gayle's slippers. Her nightie, the Wal-Mart pink. And McCreedy's boxers, Old Navy.

The mattress grazes Denny's nose, his chin. He shuts his eyes, as if to block out her horny, nutzoid histrionics. *You'd think she was giving birth to a chainsaw or something.* And McCreedy, well, he's no slouch in the ecstasy department either. Loudest Denny's ever heard a guy in the sack, in fact. Then again, Denny has only ever heard himself — the strong silent type, faithful to his fantasies, despite Gayle's repeated efforts to intrude. "*Are you dead up there? Hello, are you dead?*"

They flame out in unison. Finally.

Whatever this guy's got going for him, Denny doesn't want to think about it. He's ready for his twofer.

McCreedy lies spent on Gayle or she on him. It makes no difference,

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though from the broad sag of the mattress, Denny figures the bottom butt belongs to his loving girlfriend and longtime fiancée. Okay, so maybe stalling her on the wedding date for seven years wasn't the fairest on his part, still, getting married wasn't his idea in the first place. And then she goes out and cheats on him? McCreedy, he's only the latest.

Denny brings the knife to his side, grips it by his hip, point up. Shuts his eyes again. Breathes slow, deep. Summons all reserves of malice from his heart. And steers the blade up.

In Vegas, Denny expects an accolade or two for the weight he's dropped, but all anybody wants to know is what's with the bandage. Denny doesn't mind. At least it distracts from the crack in his glasses. Right lens. Better yet, they're talking to him. At past conferences, he's been pretty much invisible.

"Jeez, Flett," Mayweather says. "What happened? You look like a Doberman just had its ears cropped."

"Shaving," Denny tells him.

"Jeez, man, you shave your ears?"

Garner, newly appointed National Sales Manager, suggests he balance the look by taping his good ear too. All the boys crack up. Like it's the funniest thing the sucks have heard in all their lives. Then Garner ups the ante. Makes like he's waltzing with a microphone, uncorks this dumb, cartoony voice: "Paging Mr. Spock. Paging Mr. Spock. Your pointy ear has been found. Your pointy ear has been found...." — well, it was like the hilarity would never end.

Talk about lame, but Denny laughs as hard as anyone. Not that it would be enough to save him. No amount of kissing-up would have been.

Denny had missed budget nine quarters in a row. Nine, count 'em, nine! And though his numbers had come up short before, plenty of times, nobody had said so much as boo. Of course, that was in the days before the merger, before Garner, when Old Man Lieberman ran the show. Even so, wasn't a guy entitled to a bad run now and then? Didn't loyalty mean anything? And look at the territory for Christ's sake, Bismarck to Winnipeg. Hadn't he volunteered to take it on for the good of the company, when nobody else would? Didn't eleven years mean anything? Eleven years, Jesus.... What did they expect? All that competition from China. The

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pressure from the big box stores. That was the trouble. Nothing meant nothing anymore. Not country. Not people. Not family. Nothing but the bottom line. Buyers didn't give a crap about your features and your benefits — your triple-stitch seams or your patented LokTuk corners or the unfailing sincerity of your handshake. Hell, the Johnnie Walker Black he'd send to the sales and marketing boys each Christmas might as well have been jars of moonshine for all the business it threw his way. Nope. Not when they could land the same quality for a good sight less from overseas. Damn sure wasn't Denny's fault. "Ours are American-made," he'd tell them. But mattress pads just didn't register all that high on the flag-waving scale of things.

Garner drops the bomb. Hatchet cool in his Brooks Brothers pinstripe. Hair pomaded to a thick plastic sludge. Diamond stud in his left lobe trading glitter with the hotel's famed galaxy of crystal overhead. He catches up to Denny by the elevators, on the Saturday night, not five minutes after the closing banquet. Gets right to it, despite the grenades of joy exploding around them, congratulations and back-slapping and laughter zinging about like so much shrapnel. Garner hollers above the din, "We're letting you go, Flett."

"Go where?" Denny's head swells with optimism. Maybe they're finally sending him south, giving him a shot at Teddy Garcia's territory. Not that he didn't feel bad for ol' Teddy G. Still, one man's stroke, another man's stroke of good fortune.

Garner blocks the door, keeps the others at bay on the mezzanine. Mayweather. Dubroff. Reich. Montello. Koltai. "Need some privacy here, boys," he says with a wink, and it dawns on Denny he may be the only one who doesn't know what's going down.

"Better off alone right now, eh, you and me?" Garner says, eyebrow cocked in what may be empathy. But they are hardly alone.

Somehow. Incredibly. Garner has failed to notice the woman pressed into the corner behind him. She's slight, but not that slight. And Denny, he sees her just fine. Hell, yeah. Face in silver compact. Lipstick artfully in hand. Lips red, redder, redder.... Fingernails a glossy match, manicured just short of lethal. And, *thank the Lord*, no ring on any finger. He can't take his eyes off her, in fact. And watching her, well, he can only hope she'll be touching up her face for a nice long while before she glances up.

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Not only because he knows a guy like him wouldn't stand a chance with a woman like her, but because he'll be forced to look away, make like he wasn't staring at all.

Garner taps 44. Doesn't bother to ask Denny for his floor and Denny doesn't think to volunteer it. "Business isn't what it used to be, Flett. Companies like ours, we can't afford to carry the dead weight anymore."

She just might be the most beautiful woman Denny's ever seen, outside a *Victoria's Secret* catalog. And that means a lot, seeing how Vegas is crawling with beautiful women. Hell, she's more than beautiful, so much so, he regrets not having been more diligent in reading Gayle's old *Reader's Digest*s, especially the *It Pays to Increase Your Word Power* pages, because he knows there's got to be better adjectives to do her justice than beautiful alone.

"We need to cut out the fat, Flett, if you catch my drift."

Her hair is a cautious red, cut Cleopatra style, long, shiny and straight, a veil of bangs to eyes. Her brown, brown eyes.

"Frankly, Flett, you should've been axed years ago. Not once, man, I'm telling you — not once have you earned a penny above your draw. Unbelievable. Not one red cent. What have you been doing — sleepwalking? The buyers, they tell me, it's like you don't know a damn thing about bedding."

Her dress is black, yet shimmers silver, even in the ratty light of the elevator. And, oh God, how it clings.

Garner tugs Denny's lapel, stashes an envelope in the inside pocket. "A fair package by any standard. One week for every year, plus vacation. Man, I couldn't believe you've never taken a vacation."

She caps the lipstick and Denny drops his gaze, but not so quick as to miss her smile. Warm. Amused. Charitable. Like it's not the first time she's caught some desperado ogling. Like she's not put off by him in the slightest. And he knows it's nuts to even think it, but he's wondering if maybe she's not one of those love-at-first-sight deals; he can feel it in his chest, the stop 'n' go of his heart. Knows she'll be good for him. Convinced she'll see the worth in him. Or, could be, Denny is just having a coronary.

"The team and me, we're meeting for drinks up in the Moonglow now. Great view of the city, Flett, if you haven't been. But not tonight, eh?

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The boys, they're pretty pumped and it'd be a shame to have you bring them down. Save your good-byes for the getaway breakfast, okay, sport? And if you don't mind me telling you, I'd get that crack in your glasses fixed real soon. Makes you look like one of those mental defectives."

As they pass 39, she snaps her compact shut, giving Garner quite the start. She reaches past him and you'd think a ninja assassin had dropped in to do battle with the National Sales Manager of the Calabash Bedding Company. The guy reels on his heels, his head and shoulders hit the wall, and his hands fly up to protect his face. But all she does is tap the panel at 41, and Garner, red-faced, scrambles to recover his cool. "Well, hello, gorgeous. Where have you been all my life?" She segues from purr to mild giggle, as if charmed by Garner's lack of charm.

Embarrassed for his boss, pleased a little too, Denny examines the scuff marks on the toes of his shoes, then stiffens. Her hand is on his back.

He holds his breath, swallows, as she touches his shoulder, the nape of his neck, his cheek — the smooth tips of her fingernails grazing the corner of his mouth. And for the briefest of moments she looks him in the eye, her red lips parted in prelude to a kiss. And before Denny or Garner can begin to fathom what has transpired, the elevator doors open and shut, and she slips away on 41.

"Oh man, what I wouldn't give.... Vegas hookers, eh, Flett?"

Not a hooker, Denny thinks. Maybe one of those high-priced escorts, but no hooker, no way. And then a rotten possibility stirs up inside his head, performs a nasty little jig before rebounding to his gut. *Why the hell else would she give him any notice — a nothing like him*? Oh, Jesus. The envelope. His severance. She couldn't. *The love of his life*, she wouldn't. His hand darts to his pocket.

DENNY MAKES HASTE to 41, desperate to pick up her trail. He's ready to write the whole thing off as some sort of misunderstanding, as long as she returns his check, that is. He hasn't told a soul. Not even Garner. What good is it to her, anyhow, check in his name and all? Heck, maybe she'll be so grateful to him for letting her off the hook, she'll invite him into her room for drinks or something. And wouldn't that be something!

Sniffs, thinks he's caught a whiff of her perfume. Listens by a door, not

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clear on what he's listening for, short of that purr-giggle thing of hers. Moves on. Dawdles by a few more doors, before taking a break at the refreshment alcove. He's hoping maybe she'll get the munchies.

He drops a handful of change into the candy machine. Punches up some M&M Peanuts, but a pack of earplugs shoots the chute. He lunges for the machine as if to kill, then senses someone behind him.

It's a guy cradling an ice bucket. A pudgy linebacker decked out in the hotel's monogrammed terry bathrobe and, from what Denny can tell, a lacy black bra and stockings with garters too. The guy nods, says, "That's the trouble with cheap lenses. I once cracked a pair and scratched my cornea."

Denny checks his watch. It's later than he thought. Decides he'd better get down to his room.

The worst part will be telling Garner to put a stop on the check. Damn. He was hoping he'd never have to speak to the prick again. Or maybe, maybe, he's better off forgetting the whole thing, let her keep the money. Yeah. Could be she needs the cash more than he does. Looking how she does, dressing the way she does, can't be cheap. Hell yeah, that's exactly what he'll do. As soon as he tracks her down, he'll put it right to her. "You can keep the money," he'll say. She's got to see something in him then. How could she not love him then?

Damn door won't open. Still, Denny pumps the card into the slot till his wrist gives out. His bum wrist. The wrist he sprained driving the knife into the mattress.

He broods all the way to reception, but things start looking up fast. The desk clerk is reprogramming his card when Denny spots her. She's crossing the lobby, on a beeline for the casino. Black velvet clutch in hand.

"Hey!" He rushes after her, his larynx wound so tight, his shouts peter down to a series of gusty bleats. He hesitates, uneasy about making physical contact, then goes ahead and taps her on the shoulder. Her bare shoulder. He braces for the worst, expects she might threaten him with one of those sexual harassment suits or the like. Wouldn't be the first time his intentions have been misunderstood.

She whirls about, huge smile on shiny pink lips, anxious to see who's so eager for her attention. "Yes?" she says, enthusiasm holding, though

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it's evident she doesn't know who the hell he is. And all he can do is stand there like a dope, because he hasn't a clue as to who she is either. And he can't for the life of him comprehend how he has confused this bikini blonde for the wondrous redhead from the elevator. Her hair is short, for Christ's sake, and she's got to be a good head taller. Younger too. Early twenties, easy. And though she's plenty pretty, she is not the woman he plans to marry. Not even close. Except maybe for her eyes. There's something about her brown, brown eyes. Jesus, can love-at-first-sight be habit-forming?

Sheepish comes naturally to Denny Flett. "I...uh...I thought you were ...I'm sorry."

"I love the slots, don't you?" she says, though it's not really a question.

Denny retrieves his room key. "Your ear is bleeding," the clerk tells him.

The maid has forgotten to make his bed. Again. He could let it pass. He'll be checking out first thing, before that goddamn getaway breakfast, that's for sure. Still, it's a matter of principle.

He dials Housekeeping. Starts out well enough, his important businessman voice, but he loses momentum by the end of the first sentence and, by the beginning of third, he's a fifth grader tattling to teacher. Housekeeping tells him he's had DO NOT DISTURB hanging from his door since the night he checked in and it's a good thing he called too, because they were about to send up Tito from Security to see if Mr. Flett in 512 wasn't the latest guest to exit on a Seconal spritzer or a slash 'n' splash in the tub.

Denny apologizes. Housekeeping mutters off with what he hears as "No problem, Mr. Flett," but on reflection registers more precisely as "No problem, dickhead."

He sighs the third or fourth longest sigh of his sorry life. Doesn't feel the least bit sleepy. Finds himself by the window, willing to be inspired by the awesome panorama of this city in the desert or to jump, but he can find neither the drawstring nor the guts. *Why are hotel curtains so damn heavy, anyhow?*

He probes the bed and bed sheets for the TV remote, comes up with

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it quicker than expected. *Hey, maybe his luck is changing.* He clicks at the twenty-seven-incher. Nothing. Clicks rapid-fire until he feels the batteries leaking onto his palm.

He hangs his jacket on the bathroom door, confronts himself in the mirror. Shakes his head, groans at the misery groaning back. Sets his glasses on the vanity and the top section of the broken lens drops out. He will never buy prescription glasses on eBay again.

He rolls up his sleeves and unwraps the pressure bandage from his wrist, relieved it has gone unnoticed, unlike his ear. Should've worn his dad's old hunting hat, that's what he should've done. The green one with the earflaps. Garner and the boys might've looked at him freaky, but didn't they already? Still, they might have let him be. Maybe he'd still have his job.

Denny dries his hands, puts on his broken glasses. He can see down all right, it's the looking straight ahead that's become kind of awkward.

He reaches for his jacket, but it snags on the hook, drops to the tiles and the envelope sails out.

The envelope.

He can't believe what he sees.

But of course! The jacket. Same suit he's worn for the last he-doesn't-know-how-many years, it's got two inside pockets. Two, count 'em, two! Garner, of course, he'd been facing Denny when he'd stuffed it into his pocket. Only natural it'd be the one on the right. *How could he have been so stupid not to look*?

Denny waltzes into the bedroom, lips all over the envelope, like it's him and her in full-out foreplay. Heck, he'd kick up his heels if he hadn't pulled a ligament last time he tried the stunt.

He taps out the check. Shuts one eye, squints with the other. "Holy freakin' cow."

He whoops headfirst onto the bed. Jesus! He's rich. By Denny Flett standards anyhow. It is more money than he has had at one time in his entire life. And in five seconds flat he knows exactly what he's going to do with it.

"And how many more nights will you be with us then, Mr. Flett?" the desk clerk asks.

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"As many as it takes," Denny says, as cool and as slick as he has ever managed to be, despite the broken glasses. So cool and slick, in fact, he feels the need to repeat himself: "As many as it takes."

He scouts out the casino, the slots, the tables, before heading out into the night.

Denny Flett, he's got some serious shopping to do.

DENNY HAS always had a problem with that first-day-of-the-rest-of-your-life malarkey. He's never been sure whether the rest part means *whatever's left* or *a good night's sleep*. But watching the sun rise, cresting the mountains with marching band purple and orange, well, he has no doubt it can only be the former. And the sooner he makes it back to the hotel, he figures, the sooner his rest will begin.

He fuels up on Starbucks and a cranberry scone and plants himself in the lobby. He knows she's somewhere in the place, just doesn't know why he knows. But when she finally does come down for breakfast or whatever, he will be ready to profess his love. He's got his lines down pat. No way she'll be able to refuse him. Not with his new khaki suit. *Hugo Boss*. His spiffy new boots with their patented two-inch *InvisiLifts*. Not with his puffy new hairstyle, combed to cover both bald spot and wounded ear. Not with his frameless new specs. And not with the gift he's got for her in his pocket. *God, Vegas is Heaven. Anything you want, anytime, day or night.*

Once, after being held hostage for a summer, baby-sitting a neighbor's hell-spawn of homicidal ferrets, and receiving not so much as a kick in the ass in return, Denny commenced to compile a list of every stupid thing he had ever done, vowing never to repeat. He gave up at 243, the exercise too damn depressing. But these are different times and he's a different man. Look at him, for God's sake. *No way his latest stupid thing could lie dead ahead.*

Come ten, his patience pays off.

She emerges from behind a flotilla of carnivorous junket junkies, their rabid eyes in pursuit as she struts to the fore, seraphic, bewitching, in white cotton dress, yellow sandals with heels.

He rises, anxious not to appear too anxious. God, she's lovely, hair

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curling-iron wavy as it falls about bare shoulders. And the way she moves — a dancer, a showgirl, a ballerina on the lam.

Mayweather barrels out of nowhere, snares Denny in the crook of his arm, fist poised in mock noogie. "Jeez, man, how you doin'? I heard the news. What a shame. Garner was sure you'd show for breakfast, but I knew better. I know you, man. I know you."

"I got to go," Denny says.

Mayweather holds on. "It's been a while since, you and me, we had a heart-to-heart."

Denny has never had a heart-to-heart with anyone, least of all Mayweather. He's counting on his bride-to-be to fill the lifetime void.

"Twenty years back, I was you, Flett. Believe me, I've been there. Booze. Drugs. Gambling. Women. Red meat. Did it all. But I'm telling you, getting downsized, losing my livelihood, nothing worse."

She's chatting up some biddy who's glued to a walker, pats the woman's hand with genuine affection, turns toward the casino. *She's perfect. Beautiful, and fond of old people to boot! What more could he ask for?*

"I'm not saying it's the answer for everyone, but I'm telling you, Flett, Jesus worked wonders for me."

Damn, he's lost her.

"Will you promise me, Flett, you'll give Him a shot?"

"I have, plenty of times, but He keeps shooting back."

"Hey, nice tie, Flett. Is it new? And jeez, your suit...."

He breaks Mayweather's grasp, makes good his escape.

His relief is immediate. There's no missing her white dress. Heck, won't surprise him one darn bit if it turns out she's wearing it for him — a flag of surrender, so to speak.

She is wending her way down an alley of slots, all smiles and cotton-candy charm. More than anything, he wants to rush up and bare his soul, but he is the new and improved Denny Flett. *The slick and cool Denny Flett.*

He keeps his distance as she goes about her business, though he has no handle on what her business may be.

Call girls aren't early risers, are they? And especially not on Sunday mornings.

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Tourist would make sense, if she were doing what tourists do. She doesn't play the games, only observes, and never in one spot for long. She flutters here and there mostly, more interested in the people than the action.

She could be working casino security. Yeah, that would make sense, if she weren't so touchy-feely. At the roulette table, for instance, she's got a mile of room to pass, yet she cruises in close, hand on some guy's shoulder, hand on some dame's thigh. God! Denny's heard about people like her, sickies who get their thrills from rubbing up against strangers. But are women into that too? Unless she's not a woman. Hell, this is Vegas, after all.

Then, too, she could be what he has suspected from the start. Thief. Pickpocket. Only problem, where does she stash her take? No give in the dress. No handbag or tote. No apparent accomplices.

By midafternoon, he has followed her through every square inch of the casino and then some. She shows no sign of letting up. Either he makes his move or he doesn't. It's now or never.

He sucks in his gut, meanders ahead just as casual as can be. A chance encounter in a jumble of slots, that's all it is. He doesn't choke, doesn't stammer, though his voice crackles on the high side. "Hey, nice to see you again. Remember me? You know, last night, the elevator?"

"Pardon me?" she says, and he needs to look twice before looking for the hidden cameras. *Is this a joke? One of those dumb TV prank shows? Do nobodies get Punk'd?* Because he's standing toe to toe with a leggy brunette who'd hold her own in the NBA, tank top and Bermudas, ponytail to her waist and Mary Janes on her feet. Hell, she'd no sooner fit in that white dress than Gayle would.

Edginess spikes down on the fringes of his psyche. "What's going on? Did you see — ?"

"The slots are fun, aren't they?" she says.

"I'm looking for this lady, this woman; she was here like two seconds ago. White sundress, a halter top, red hair, about so tall?" He hesitates, smiles goofy, blushes. "Kind of built too, you know?"

"Everybody loves the slots," she says, her hand brushing his forearm. Denny has never been partial to Amazon types, but he'd make an exception in her case, if he weren't already spoken for. Fidelity is important to Denny.

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And speaking of slots, two, one adjacent the other, are coughing up big time, spilling their precious guts. Bells. Whistles. Sirens. And a light show on the crystal ceiling that'd make a half-bad rock band seem half-good. Applause and cheering builds in waves as wannabes flock to gawk, eager to get a piece of the lucky winners — a level of joy unbeknownst to Mankind since the Israelites scored manna from Heaven.

Denny, he's left hanging. Doesn't know where the NBA chick or his woman in white have got to. Then he glimpses the white dress not thirty feet to the left and he's hooting along with the rest of the yokels.

He's on her in a flash, gets right to it, wonders aloud if she'd join him for lunch or maybe later for a drink. "So, you know, we could sort of, you know, get to know each other better." And somewhere, midblink, a dewy-eyed waif materializes in her stead, jeans and a T, *BRITNEY* scripted in blue glitter across budding chest.

She punches him playfully on the arm. "The slots are so sweet," she says, bubbles in her voice. *God, she's cute.*

Denny's no Dr. J, but he's enough on the ball to know it's bouncing plenty screwy. *So this is what a nervous breakdown feels like.* She might as well have taken a hammer to his head, the way it's throbbing. He knows, too, because he once took a hammer to the head on a weekend in D.C. Mugged half a block from Georgetown. Took everything he had, too, the bastards, which was just short of nothing.

He should back off, call a timeout, lay claim to a stool at the back of a bar, but if peddling bedding accessories for a quarter of his life has taught him anything, it is that persistence pays. Not that it ever paid for him, of course. A waste, pretty much.

He sticks with the chase, and she continues to vaporize on his cue, leaving a series of vacuous, albeit lovely bystanders in her elusive place. Blondes. Brunettes. Dark-haired exotics. Redheads with blonde streaks and blondes with red streaks. Brown-eyed women who can't keep their hands off him, poking and prodding and patting and squeezing, while endorsing the merits of slot machines with increasing belligerence. "*Why don't you just play the goddamn slots already, little man, and get the hell on home.*" Still, the attention is a pleasant departure from life as he has known it, though the wear and tear has him feeling every inch a slab of sirloin condemned to the tenderizing block.

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His feet are killing him. *Stupid new boots. Since when does he wear boots?*

He hasn't had a thing to drink or eat since the coffee and scone. And though he wants to carry the chase through to the end, he doesn't have it in him. He's been on the go pretty much since he crawled out from under Gayle's bed, and the time has come to pack it in. He's never had any luck with love. No sense fooling himself any longer his streak would end in Vegas.

Denny resigns himself to the exit.

He spies her once more, now by a blackjack table, amber drink in hand, straw between lips. She looks right at him and, for an instant, his hope soars, but the expression on her face makes clear her guard is up. He nods his concession, shrugs, and walks the other way. May be the hardest thing he's ever done, but kind of exciting too. *Imagine, Denny Flett pulling a Bogart.*

He pauses by a dollar slot, jiggles the change in his pocket, and heads across the street to the diner with the $9.99 buffet.

You'd think it was his last meal, the way he attacks the steam tables.

He turns the corner from the elevator, stops abruptly halfway up the hall.

"You're a stalker," she says. "I should call the police."

Can too many desserts cause a guy to hallucinate? Is she really waiting for him, cooling her heels by his door? Magnificent heels, too. Stilettos, for God's sake.

He does not approach, fearful she'll pull her vanishing act, worried he overdid the garlic on his lasagna.

She's back to her Cleopatra number from the night before. Red lips. Red nails. Black dress that shimmers silver. *Way too much woman for him. What the hell was he thinking?*

"Who are you?" she wants to know, more a plea than a demand.

He inches closer. Takes him four tries before the words are anywhere near intelligible. "Denny — Denny Flett."

"No, not your name. I want to know who you are and why you're here."

"I'm no stalker. Honest. I just like you, that's all. I thought you liked me too."

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She marches right up, grabs a fistful of his tie. "You think I'm going to fall for your naïve shtick? Please. Don't."

His breathing stalls at iffy. She smells so good. "I'm nobody, I swear."

"Why didn't you play the slots? Why didn't you try your luck?"

"I don't know. I didn't have any money."

"What are you talking about? I was there. I saw. That pompous ass, he gave you a check. You had more than enough."

"I spent it."

She relaxes her grip, astonished. "Surely, not all?"

"I kept a little, you know, for food and stuff, but — "

She gives the tie a swift jerk and flips it into his face. "And you couldn't spare a dollar to play? A quarter?" Her hands rest firm upon her hips.

"I was hungry. The buffet cost me ten. My last ten. And well, I—I...." He pulls the small velvet box from his pocket. "I bought you something."

She glares at the box, at him, stomps off, stomps back, a not unimpressive maneuver considering her four-inch heels.

"Open it." He extends his hand. "Please."

"You can't buy me gifts. I don't want your gifts. You were supposed to play the slots."

"I know it's kind of sudden. And we hardly know each other. But when something is right, two people, well, they can just feel it. And a lot of good looking women — you see it in *People* magazine all the time — they go out with not-so-good-looking guys. Remember Lyle Lovett and Julia Roberts? Claudia Schiffer and that magician guy?" Denny can't believe the voice is his, the lines flowing as rehearsed, the odd stutter notwithstanding. "And last night, I mean, when you touched me...." He pops the lid of the box. "I was hoping maybe you'd marry me."

"What's the matter with you? You think I'm a fairy-tale whore with a heart of gold and you're the lovable mug who's going to carry me away from all this? You think this is a movie?"

"You're a hooker?"

"For God's sake, you know damn well who I am."

"Look, if I did something wrong, I'm sorry. I just thought you liked me."

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She squeezes his arm where the bicep should be. Steps back. "Tell me what you see."

"You. I see you."

"No. My hair. My face. My eyes. My hands. Tell me what I look like."

He answers as best he can, falling for her all over again. "You're so beautiful."

She lays her hand on his cheek. "Tell me again. Tell me what you see."

His description is the same. "You're so, so beautiful."

"And you need a thesaurus."

"But you are."

She musses his hair. "My height. How tall am I? And my nose, tell me about my nose. My eyebrows. My lips. My chin."

The details do not vary.

"And earlier, when I wore the white dress, what did you see? Me or someone you thought was me?"

"No. You. Of course. I mean, your hair was different...."

"A different color?"

"No. Just done up different. Softer. Wavy. I'd never mistake you anywhere."

"You're not supposed to see me the same way twice. Nobody sees me the same way twice. Nobody."

"Sounds like a lot of work."

"Not until you came along."

"Please, take the ring. You don't have to marry me, honest. Just take it. I got nobody else to give it to."

"Who are you? C'mon. Really? You're hiding something, I'm certain of it."

He shuffles uncomfortably. "You mean about Gayle?"

"So you're married? I should have guessed."

"No. Never. She cheated on me. And then, well, it's over now."

"You're a lousy liar. You may be able to see the real me, but I can most definitely see the real you."

"You know then, about killing her?"

Her grin is smug. "I do now."

"I was going to get them both. Wait till they were finished, you know. But no sooner do I stick the knife in the mattress, it hits a coil or

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something, and goes off all cockeyed. Gets jammed up smack over my head and I can't push it in and I can't pull it out."

"As I recall, your former employer mentioned something about your poor knowledge of bedding."

"Yeah, I forgot there'd be coils. But that wasn't the worst of it. Gayle and him, well, they start going at it again, like they hadn't done it two seconds before."

"Lucky girl."

"And that knife is up there twisting and turning, bobbing this way and that. That's how I sprained my wrist, trying to pull it out. See, how it's all swollen here. Then, get this, when they finish up, they go into the shower together, like they haven't had enough of each other already. Plus, they leave the bathroom door wide open. I can see everything. They're soaping each other up. And they're singing this Faith Hill song Gayle really loves, and they don't sound half bad, either. Well, I can't stomach any more, I'm going to be sick, so I turn my head, and a good thing too. Because right then, the bedspring sprung or something, and the knife gets me right in the glasses and takes off the top of my ear."

He waits for her to stop laughing.

"I didn't move till they got the hell out of the house. Took their good sweet time too."

"Let's face it, Dennis, you lost your nerve; it's as simple as that. But my oh my, what a masterful loser you are. Indeed, to want to kill your lover in the first place, rather than merely end the relationship on rational terms. And then, to follow through on your desire and to fail so pathetically.... Pure genius. I had you pegged the moment I laid eyes on you. Unfortunately, I underestimated the extent of your folly."

"It's the way things go for me. I'm used to it."

"No wonder this has happened! You can't recognize luck even when it stares you in the face."

"I don't think it ever has."

"You honestly don't know who I am, do you?"

He shakes his head. "An actress, is that it? Have I seen you in something? If you told me your name maybe...."

She leans against the door of his room, suddenly weary. "Do you mind if we go inside? My feet are killing me."

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"Hey! Mine, too."

His key fails to open the door. *What else is new*? She promises to wait while he goes down to have the card reprogrammed. He doesn't believe her for a second, so she gives him her clutch as collateral.

Alone in the elevator, he peeks inside. The small black purse is empty.

"You may well have ruined my life," she tells him. She sits in the corner of the sofa, small pillow on her lap, a miniature bottle of vodka in hand. Her feet, in sheer black hose, rest upon the coffee table. Her toenails are painted red too. "I can't let you get away with this."

"I'm sorry," Denny says. "I didn't mean to do whatever it is I did." He drags the chair over from the desk.

"If I don't make things right with you, they'll demote me for sure. Put me back working the 7-Elevens, I'll bet. Nothing's worse than lottery tickets. Not even the sulky circuit up north."

"What do you do, exactly? Security?"

"Some might call it that."

"If it'll help, you can keep the ring. You can see it's no Cracker Jack junk; it's worth a small fortune. But I got no use for it anymore."

She slips the diamond onto her finger, assesses it in the lamplight. "Quite the whopper. Are you always so rash?"

"Only when I eat citrus fruit," he says, and her reaction represents a milestone in his personal history: A woman has laughed at a Denny Flett joke.

"I know it was crazy of me," he says, "but when I saw you in the elevator, I thought it was fate, like everything was going to be all right for me from here on out."

"It should have been. It could have been. If you knew how to take a hint. People do come to Vegas to gamble, you know?"

"You made me feel so good. You see, I've always had this thing.... I've never told anyone this. You see, I'm not scared of dying; I'm scared of dying and not leaving anybody behind who cares I'm gone. I guess that's what I was hoping for in you, that you'd be the one to miss me."

"God, bring on the violins. You are truly the ultimate mope. I'm not sure I can take much more of you." She pads barefoot to his unmade bed. "How much money do you have?"

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"None." He searches his pockets, turns up two dimes.

"You'll need a little more. I can't give you the money, because then it wouldn't be yours. It won't work otherwise. The money has to be yours." She scans the room in search of he knows not what, her gaze settling on the diamond on the third finger of her left hand. A liquid smile slinks wittingly across her lips. "But I can buy something from you, can't I? That would not be against the rules."

She plucks a dollar from her velvet clutch. "Here," she says to him. "Your wish is fulfilled. The ring is mine."

"You can have it for nothing, I told you. I don't need money where I'm going."

She folds the dollar into the handkerchief pocket of his new khaki suit.

He protests. "Honest. I don't need it."

"Believe me, you do." She loosens his tie, unbuttons his shirt. "But first you need to get lucky. Really, really lucky."

She wakes to find him staring.

"Your eyes," he says, brain struggling to put two and two together. "All those women in the casino yesterday, they had your eyes."

"Yes, they surely did," she says.

"They were friends of yours, weren't they? They were trying to keep me away from you."

She buries her face in the pillow, exasperation riding the downside of a yawn.

"I love you," he tells her.

"Everybody does," comes her muffled reply.

IT'S A RED DRESS day. Denny hasn't a clue as to how she came up with it — he's seen no suitcase — but he doesn't much mind. Black was nice. White was great. But red is her color.

She leads him by the hand as they enter the casino and he wishes to hell Gayle and McCreedy were here to see it. Garner, too. Mayweather. All the boys. Man, wouldn't they just bust!

She insists he choose the machine. Her rules, again.

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The slot sucks up his bill.

"If you ask me, it's going to be nothing but a waste of a good dollar," he says.

"Don't bet on it," she advises, and kisses him full on the mouth. She winks. "A little extra insurance."

"God, you're beautiful," he says, as he pulls the handle.

And he's thinking she's even more beautiful when she's angry. She races ahead of him, all rage and fury, L'Oréal and Chanel, muttering about 7-Elevens and lottery tickets and over her dead body.

"Everybody wins. Everybody. But you, you.... I don't know how much of me it's going to take, I don't know how long, but you're not going to get away with this. You're not going to do this to me." She pretty much throws him onto the bed. "I've met plenty of losers — more than you can imagine — but never one as unlucky as you."

Denny doesn't say a word. Grins maybe a little.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

"THE MORE, THE MERRIER" is a great way to run a party, so when we celebrate our fifty-seventh anniversary next month, we're inviting lots of friends. Just who we'll be able to fit between the covers of the issue remains to be seen, but we expect to bring you:

"Pol Pot's Beautiful Daughter" by Geoff Ryman—a hard-edged yet compassionate fantasy about a woman who does not exist and the spirits that do.

"El Regalo" by Peter S. Beagle—a lovely contemporary adventure story for Young Adults of all ages.

"Pop Squad" by Paolo Bacigalupi—a grim vision of the future by the author of "The Calorie Man."

We hope to squeeze in new stories by Albert E. Cowdrey, Carrie Richerson, and Charles Coleman Finlay as well, but you'll have to wait a month to find out just who joins the party.

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CURIOSITIES

DR. TRANSIT, BY "I. S." (1925)

JOHN AND Mary are affectionate newlyweds who want to swap genders. They visit Doctor Transit, a dwarf who has perfected a series of sex-change injections. The transition from female to male is rapid and exhilarating; the change from male to female takes longer and has a calming effect.

John becomes Joan, and Mary becomes Marlowe. The turnabout spouses remain married and in love; their new gonads function so well that Marlowe impregnates Joan. They decide that their forthcoming child will be male; if it's a girl, they'll ask Dr. Transit to correct the oversight. But after giving birth, Joan is homesick for her previous gender. Dr. Transit transforms Joan into an entirely new male named Jeremiah. Marlowe and the child discreetly fade out of the narrative.

Dr. Transit is murdered by a woman: apparently a genuine female, not one of his male clients. Jeremiah attempts to commit rape, then compiles a list of items that "in the absence of woman herself ...fulfill the place of woman." Heading the list is "a square of paper." Jeremiah concludes that the perfect emblem of womanhood — "because of its headlong monotony of motion, in endless self-pursuit" — is the swastika.

This deeply misogynist transgender novel of 1925 discusses sexuality so frankly that the author was identified solely by initials. "I. S." was in fact Isidor Schneider (1896–1977), a Russian émigré who was active in the U.S. communist party, befriended the Hollywood Ten, and served in the Spanish Civil War.

—F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre

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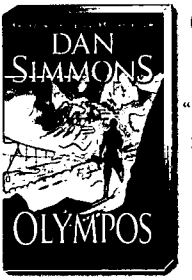

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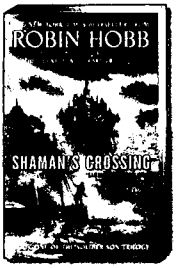

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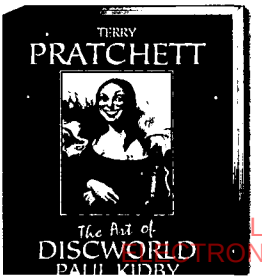

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